

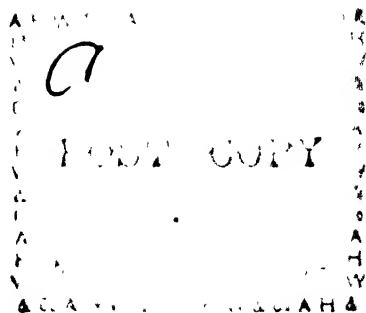
Birla Central Library

PILANI (Jaipur State)

Class No - 823

Book No - B 82 B

Accession No - 6357



BIRDS OF PREY

BIRDS OF PREY

BY

ANDREW CASSELS BROWN



METHUEN & CO. LTD.
36 ESSEX STREET W.C.
LONDON

First Published *February 21st 1925*
Second and Cheaper Edition *1930*

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

TO
JOHN JEFFREY
M.D., F.R.C.S.E.
in
affection to tribute
to a
friendship
which has lasted
unruffled and unbroken
for more than
thirty years

The following extract is reprinted (by courtesy of the proprietors) from the January number of *Amateur Sport*. Vol II, No. 1.

FAMOUS SPORTSMEN OF TO-DAY

XIII. JULIAN SCRIMGEOUR

EVEN in these enlightened times superstition dies hard, and it is to be supposed that its devotees—though, maybe, the word 'victims' would describe them with greater truth—will hold up their hands in horror when they discover that the name of Julian Scrimgeour has here been associated with that unfortunate '13' which has earned the unenviable distinction of being the most unlucky numeral in history. Let them lay aside their idle fears; if ever there were an individual who could afford to laugh at such a so-called ill-omened conjunction, it is assuredly the subject of this month's tabloid biography.

To many thousands of our readers the mere mention of Scrimgeour's name will conjure up a picture of a tall, dark-complexioned, good-looking young man, lithe, wiry, and active, with the broad shoulders and the slender hips which have marked the born athlete time out of mind. But true success in every form of sport depends to a far greater degree on an acuteness of brain rather than on any perfection of body, no matter how indispensable the latter possession must always be, and it is a comforting reflection to realize that many of our leading athletes—to say the great majority of them would be no exaggeration—are as distinguished from the intellectual point of view as they are in the world of play.

Scrimgeour is no exception to the general rule, and a short description of his record to date will not be out of place. Born twenty-eight years ago, the only son of General (then Captain) Scrimgeour, who was killed on the Somme in '16, he was educated at Upton and Cambridge. At Upton he was in the Upper VIth, and in his last school year he distinguished himself by winning the Founder's Prizes for Latin Hexameters and the English Essay, in addition to gaining an Exhibition at the University. His scholastic attainments were, however, somewhat overshadowed by his athletic prowess, for he was not only Captain of the XV and the cricket XI, but also held the school 'record' for both the 100 and the 220 yards. Not content with this, he carried off every available prize for swimming, and it may be mentioned that during his earlier years at school he received the Royal Humane Society's Bronze Medal for his most gallant rescue of a younger boy who had been swept out to sea by a treacherous current and was in imminent peril of drowning.

At Cambridge the bestowal upon him of a Rugby Blue during his first year was a foregone conclusion, and eventually he also represented his university in the shorter track events. Four years ago he was awarded his first Scottish Cap, and since then he has played for his country in each successive match, being by now universally recognized as one of the most brilliant three-quarter backs who has ever shone in that responsible position. But the reputation he has won for himself on the football field has not been allowed to interfere with his intellectual work: he is rapidly making a name for himself as a free-lance journalist of acute and ready observation and as the author of certain fugitive pieces written with notable lucidity and charm. Rumour has it that he is at

present engaged on the compilation of a book, the subject matter of which is understood to be of a more serious nature and of a more ambitious type than anything he has as yet produced.

Socially, Scrimgeour is assured of that popularity which invariably attends upon any man who wears his honours unassumingly. Like many people of artistic temperament, he is inclined to be over-sensitive and, possibly, a little shy and reticent in general company. Certainly he is to be seen at his best at some informal gathering of a few of his more intimate friends. Then, and only then, does he do anything like real justice to the remarkable powers of intelligence with which he has been so plentifully endowed.

To turn to the more legitimate purpose of this notice, it may at once be said that, while the Scottish forwards now playing are more than worthily upholding the great tradition that has been handed down to them, the selectors of the National XV are experiencing no small difficulty in the choice of their back division. There are many aspirants of first rate ability amongst the players available, but only one whose genius is beyond cavil or doubt. On his day, Julian Scrimgeour is undisputedly in a class by himself, a three quarter back who is as puzzling and ingenious in attack as he is steady and resourceful in defence.

It is, perhaps, when on the offensive that his mastery of the game stands out most conspicuously, the rapid, unerring judgment which enables him to pick out the weakest spot in the ranks of the opposing team, no less than the amazing swerve of which he is capable when going at full speed, making him at once an ever present source of danger to his adversaries and a peculiarly difficult man to stop. As the Irishman once put it, rather happily, "The confounded fellow is as slippery as an eel. The last time I played against him, I'll swear I had my hands gripped tightly round a pair of the creature's ankles that weren't there!" A power of kicking accurately and with either foot well into touch, an ease of delivering a well delivered and lightning pass, and, above all, an unflagging energy displayed from start to finish of a game, are amongst the further valuable assets which Scrimgeour can give to his side. If he has a fault, somewhat venial, perhaps, as circumstances stand, it is that of a tendency to monopolize the play once the ball is in his hands. In justice to him, however, it must be stated that the remaining members of the three quarter line seem to be by no means unwilling to see it safely there as often as may be.

In defence Scrimgeour is seldom rattled, and it is a sheer joy to watch the skilful manner in which he has again and again picked up the ball from the very feet of a fierce opposing forward rush. On such occasions he has often enough by means of a timely, almost inspired punt, been enabled to regain as much ground as has been lost. His kicking is clean and strenuous, and no one who saw the incident last year when he literally shot across the field and won the championship for Scotland by collaring Stubbings when that burly warrior was almost over the line is ever likely to forget so great and glorious a deed.

If Scotland is to repeat her triumph this year, and many shrewd critics are of the opinion that she has it in her power to do so, it is safe to prophesy that she will owe her possible success in no little measure to the proven prowess and the tried experience of Julian Scrimgeour.

S.S.

BIRDS OF PREY

CHAPTER I

THE doctor, my old friend Hubert Brett, deftly inserted a safety pin into the bandage which he had just reapplied to my damaged foot. Then straightening himself with a satisfied grunt and standing with his back to the fire, he regarded me with what I suppose he imagined was a stony and reproving stare

'Damned silly business, Colin,' he growled, 'trying to stop a twenty-five horse-power motor at your age.'

'Just what Daphne says,' I agreed, as cheerfully as the circumstances allowed. But before I could add another word, the door opened and my irreverent and outspoken daughter, dressed in singularly attractive outdoor apparel, came into the room

I saw Hubert Brett's grim expression vanish like chaff before the wind, and a look of whole-hearted admiration spread over his homely, honest face. 'Well, Daphne,' he exclaimed, striding towards her with outstretched arms, 'our little bet on as usual, eh?'

'Unless you like to call it off,' she laughed, grasping his hands and giving her answer in that low-pitched, musical voice of hers that never failed to give me a little tug at the heart. 'It's a dead snip for Scotland this afternoon.'

'Don't be too sure of it,' retorted Brett, shaking his head like a wise old owl. 'At the Club last night Cosmo Reddie told me that it would take Scotland all——'

'Cosmo Reddie!' Daphne interrupted, echoing the name in a tone of triumphant but pitying disdain. 'What does he know about it? Why, he played in the days when they'd twenty a side and the scrums used to last as many minutes.'

'Oh, come now,' Brett objected, 'it's not as bad as that. He may be a relic of the stone age, but there's no shrewder judge of form. He thinks the forwards will do all that is expected of them, but he's—well—er—doubtful about the backs.' He hesitated slightly as he made the remark, but quickly recovered himself and went on with an apologetic but knowing smile. 'Of course,' he said, 'there's always Julian Scrimgeour.'

Daphne dropped the hands she was holding, and looked the doctor straight in the eyes. 'Yes,' she said slowly, and as if she were picking her words with care, 'there's always Julian Scrimgeour, and, when he's on the top of his form—well, as Nigel says, *videant consules*!'

I saw a slight frown pass over Hubert's face, but in a moment it was gone, and he was laughing merrily. 'I didn't know the modern girl could be so erudite,' he said.

'She can't,' retorted Daphne, with a bow full of grace and mockery. 'But she does know something about Rugby football. Also,' she continued, with a rapid change of subject, 'she thinks that a really capable doctor might have patched up an old friend in time to go and see the match. I don't believe Dad had missed a single International since—since——'

'Since the year '88,' I chimed in, naming the date my daughter wanted. 'However, you mustn't blame the doctor—he's done his best. Besides, it doesn't matter so much these days, I shall "listen in" I see from *The Caledonian* that Cosmo is broadcasting for the B.B.C.'

'Like me to stay and listen in with you, old man?' asked Daphne, with a touch of that maternal manner which she has adopted towards me since her mother's death two years ago.

'Good Lord, no,' I returned, 'thanks very much all the same. Isn't it about time you were off? How are you getting to Murrayfield?'

She stooped quickly and lightly kissed the top of my head. 'Nigel and the parent birds are picking me up in their car at the end of the Crescent,' she replied. 'I shall bring them all back to tea here, after we've won the match.' Then, turning to Brett, she added in her gay and mischievous way, 'You going to the *débatte*?'

' Provided I find no further messages awaiting me at home from thoughtless or unsportsmanlike patients, I certainly am,' he answered, with a cheery laugh. ' I shall make a point of raising my feeble voice from time to time in support of —er—the under dog.'

Daphne responded to his words with some merry quip, and after a little further badinage they left the room together. For a while I lay quietly on my couch, my thoughts wandering back over the years that were gone. I had a vision of three small schoolboys yelling themselves hoarse for Scotland at Raeburn Place forty years ago, and I saw quite clearly the chubby face of Tom Balbirny, the rather saturnine features of Harry Scrimgeour, and the freckled countenance of Colin Blair—myself. And I fell to musing over our respective careers in life.

Tom Balbirny, who was a successful stockbroker and had married a cousin of my wife's, was now living at a pleasant little place called Hawkstane among the Pentland Hills, and was in the habit of coming in to his office in Edinburgh only once or twice a week. He and Alice, his wife, had a very cheery family of two girls and two boys, of whom the Nigel I have already mentioned was the elder boy. With this family Daphne and her two brothers, now both abroad in the employ of two old and well-established business firms, had always been particularly intimate, and here I may as well mention the fact that, for the last couple of years, Nigel had fallen into the habit of proposing for Daphne's heart and hand, on an average, about once a month. Indeed, he did it quite openly, and, as seems to be the correct mode in these days, without a trace of bashfulness when making his declaration or a shadow of despair when his application was laughingly and invariably turned down.

That Daphne was very fond of him I knew well, and, had it not been for Julian Scrimgeour, I think she might have surrendered to his indefatigable pursuit. But Julian's striking success as journalist and writer, his mighty prowess at all forms of sport, and the subtle fascination he so easily exercised over all who came in contact with him was, I imagined, playing havoc with any chance that Nigel might once have had. I admit

I was not in Daphne's confidence ; she, as with all her sisters in this year of grace, was not in the habit of wearing her heart on her sleeve, and on that Saturday afternoon in March of which I write I could not have told which of the two might be the favoured suitor. I did not even know whether Julian had ever put his fortune to the touch, though he was not, I thought, the kind of fellow to miss an opportunity. Anyhow, I had a sort of feeling that Daphne might be safely trusted to make a wise decision in due course of time, and I left it at that.

I was on the best of terms with both the young men, and considered there was little to choose between them in the rôle of a potential husband. If anything I had a slight prejudice in favour of Nigel, but that preference might possibly have been in existence because his parents were my most intimate friends, while Julian's widowed mother was certainly one of my pet aversions, though for Harry Scrimgeour's sake I had always kept up an appearance of being on good terms with her. He had been killed on the Somme when commanding a brigade—he had been a keen and brilliant soldier—leaving Tom Balbirny and me as trustees for his estate. This duty, together with the fact that the Scrimgeours lived next door to us in Finmount Crescent and that the bulk of the trust business fell to me as a W.S., kept me in constant association with the lady.

She deserves a paragraph to herself, and I think I can best give a description of her more salient characteristics by quoting Tom Balbirny's outburst against her on the first occasion we had met to discuss her affairs after the war. Tom's language was always more forcible than polite, and I omit his more lurid expletives.

'What the deuce Harry saw in the woman I could never fathom,' he shouted at me, almost as if I had been to blame in the matter. 'We may concede that when he married her she had a good figure and carried herself well, and had a thousand a year of her own, but even then she was as mean as they make 'em, a snob of the very first water, and the most superb self-deceiver I've ever met. Hang it all, Colin, I believe she's constitutionally incapable of speaking the truth. And then again, she's always

exhibited the conceit and the presumption and the spurious dignity that only a fool could show. I suspect she led old Harry the devil of a dance, though I think we may admit that by resourcefully falling back on the study of his profession, he made himself the finer soldier. But whether that result redounds to her credit or not I'm damned if I know. Look at her face now,' he ended up, not without a certain humorous bathos. 'Does it give you any pleasure to look at? It seems to me to have about as much expression in it as a bap, and since she has taken to applying powder to it in the amateur way she has, I'm blessed if it doesn't look more like a bap than ever!'

This critical tirade held something of cruelty and exaggeration, but I am bound to confess that I was not in entire disagreement with Tom's estimate. I remember remarking by way of answer that the number of people to whom consideration was shown, not for their own qualities but rather for the sake of their relationship to an old and valued friend, must be very considerable indeed. For Harry's and Julian's sake, then, we accepted the situation that had been forced on us, and in the course of time had come to treat Effie Scrimgeour—her name was Euphemia—with that mixture of charity and tolerance one is accustomed to show towards a grown-up person of childish traits and proclivities.

That the woman was miserable was obvious enough; she was one of those unhappy beings who in reality have never learned to stand firmly on their own feet, and under the circumstances it would have been brutal for us to have withheld such support as we were enabled to give. Not that we were not greatly tried from time to time, for, after Harry's death, she had coquetted with spiritualism for some years and used to bore us to tears with descriptions of the futile conversations she had had with his disembodied spirit. But after a time, and for some reason which we never discovered, she suddenly severed her connexion with the spiritualistic circle and sought consolation for her woes at the hands of an extreme High Church priest who called himself Father Aloysius Sadde. As Tom Balbirny used to put it in his downright way, this move

was distinctly preferable to taking to drink. For my part, though I was doubtful of the padre's absolute disinterestedness, it was a relief to see Effie happier and more contented with her lot under his care.

Julian's attitude towards his mother, I should say here, filled me with admiration. While it was true that owing to his occupation he didn't see a great deal of her, he always treated her whenever they were together with a chivalrous attention and a half-humorous protecting care that made a perfect blend, though he must occasionally have found it difficult to bear with her sundry public demonstrations of maternal affection. In talking to me of her, as he frequently did, I never remember him using one disparaging word, and Daphne, who for some subtle feminine reason of her own seemed to be rather fond of Effie, always used to insist that such treatment on Julian's part argued certain good qualities in his mother's mental and moral 'make-up' which I was too blinded by prejudice to see. Daphne, I should mention here, was herself by no means ignorant of the woman's stupid and irritating faults. Effie, on her part, was inordinately proud of her son and sang his praises indiscriminately both in and out of season.

Had it not been for Harry Scrimgeour's sensible upbringing of his boy, Julian would inevitably have run every risk of being spoilt by his mother who could, in spite of her unpleasant trait of meanness, deny him nothing. It was greatly to his credit that he scorned idle and luxurious days, and never allowed anything of the sort to interfere with the prosecution of his legitimate and, often enough, arduous work. Between him and Nigel there existed a firm alliance, though the former was now twenty-eight and five years older than the latter. This friendship, cemented as it was by a sense of gratitude and almost of hero-worship on Nigel's part—he had when a boy of twelve been most gallantly rescued from drowning by Julian, and was but an ordinary performer at any sort of game—had even stood the gruelling test of rivalry in love. And that, I thought, was as stout a proof of the sterling merit that was in them both as any reasonable man could wish.

Now, I suppose I ought to have been thinking of the further laurels awaiting Julian's brow in the contest for the Calcutta Cup that afternoon, but strangely enough, it was rather Nigel who was in my mind. He was in his father's office, and had rooms in town, and there was hardly a day passed on which we did not see something of him. He was the kind of fellow who was always on the spot when he was wanted, though never in the way, and in his person he combined a good deal of his mother's charm with much of his father's manliness. But what attracted me more than anything else to him was a certain *naïveté* of character which had a habit of showing itself from time to time when he was in the company of people he liked and admired. On these occasions he somehow succeeded, without the least sign of priggishness, in unconsciously conveying to the particular covey he was with that he was absolutely compacted of the right stuff. Perhaps I can better explain what I mean by telling a little story.

One afternoon, when he was about sixteen, we had all motored over to Hawkstane, and a large muster of young people had taken part in some pretty strenuous tennis. It was after a great game, in which he had certainly distinguished himself more than usual, that he (his school blazer thrown carelessly over his shoulder and a slight frown of annoyance on his open face) was walking with me up to the house for tea. I remember idly wondering what had happened to put him out, and was talking of indifferent subjects when he suddenly turned to me and without any preliminary introduction asked me the following pithy if somewhat unexpected question.

'Uncle Colin'—I held this brevet rank so far as the Balbirny children were concerned—'why do people think it necessary to bleat about a fellow's play? There was that old goat, Sophie Gilchrist, all over me just now, congratulating me on the magnificent show I had put up in that last game. Where's the sense in it? I know perfectly well myself whether I played my best or not without her butting in, and'—he added slowly—'I'm not going to take praise or blame from any one.'

As he had himself answered the question to his own

satisfaction and mine, I contented myself with the rejoinder that doubtless the old lady—she was, incidentally, a somewhat faded and distinctly bearded spinster of six-and-sixty years or thereabouts—was only giving a sop to her own vanity by claiming an importance to which she was not justly entitled. If she thought, I went on, that by praising his play she was protecting what little dignity she possessed, he need not grudge her the poor little consolation. But at the same time I took care to add to this homily my conviction that he was profoundly right never to be swayed by any outside opinion, provided always that he continued to keep his mind free from the fetters of self-deception. He received my platitudinous remarks with one of his slow smiles—there was always a rare glint of humour behind his eyes, and little lurking imps of amusement which twitched at the corners of his lips—though he made no reply.

But after tea I came across him again. He was sitting on a garden seat with Miss Gilchrist, and the two of them were doubled up with mirth. From the abrupt manner in which that mirth suddenly ceased when I appeared on the scene, I suspected—not without justification, as I afterwards discovered—that the merriment had been induced by the young devil at my expense.

I was inwardly chuckling over this recollection when I glanced at the clock and found that the match was due to start in two minutes' time. So I lit another pipe, switched on the wireless, fitted the earphones on my head, and settled down to listen in to Cosmo Reddie's running comment on the game.

I recognized his voice at once and was just in time to hear him say that there was a crowd of at least eighty thousand already gathered round the ground and that people were still streaming in. What a wonderful crowd it always is at Murrayfield—well-dressed, orderly, intelligent and keen. And what a difference in numbers from the few thousands of enthusiasts who used to gather round the ropes in the old days at Raeburn Place. What a difference, too, in the method of play from that doleful day when the Welsh XV, playing four three-quarters for the first time, simply made rings round Scotland. I

almost shuddered now when I recalled my sense of despair on that historic occasion.

I never can admit, by the way, that an International match is as a rule as productive of such excellent football as that put up by a good club or, better still, by a good school XV. This particular game, during the first half at any rate and according to Reddie's account of it, was distinguished by a succession of brilliant bits of individual play on both sides and an almost complete absence of anything like sound team work. At the interval Scotland led by three points to nil, a try having been scored by Craigie as the result of a concerted and typical Scottish forward rush. In the remarks made by Reddie during the interval, I noticed that he made no reference to Julian, and could only surmise that our famous three-quarter was—as happened occasionally—not by any means playing up to his usual standard. But this omission did not prepare me for the shock I got three minutes before the match came to an end.

During the second half the two sides were apparently combining much better together, and play raged strenuously in the region of the centre of the field for most of the time. But in the last ten minutes a dangerous invasion of Scottish territory took place. I could hear the roar of the multitude round the field rising ever louder and louder, and Reddie's voice growing more excited and anxious as the moments passed. Then, three minutes before time was called, came the fatal announcement in a regular spate of rapid words. 'English touch! England only fifteen yards from the Scots line! Craven has thrown the ball in!—an English forward has it, and has passed to Stubbings!—Stubbings to Spencer!—he's tackled by Falconer, but Stubbings has the ball again!—he's sent it, a beautiful pass, right out to Hawkins on the wing!—Hawkins going straight for the line!—he's passed MacIvor!—Scrimgeour's coming across!—he's got him!—no, he hasn't!—Hawkins has scored for England far out!'

There was a deafening shout of triumph from the thousands of English supporters present, but it did not prevent me catching a sentence spoken to Reddie by the other man in the B.B.C. box. Doubtless, in the

excitement of the moment, he had forgotten the uncanny powers of the microphone. But I heard the damning criticism with a painful distinctness, and this is what it was:

' Good Lord ! Reddie, Scrimgeour ought to have stopped his man easily ; I never saw such a pitiable case of funk in my life ! '

CHAPTER II

THE difficult place-kick failed, and the match ended in a draw. But, as I laid the earphones down and switched off the wireless set, I was conscious that any natural disappointment I should otherwise have felt about the result was literally swamped by the sense of consternation I experienced over the news of Julian's ghastly failure. Try as I would to get the unpleasant indictment out of my head, it recurred again and again with a maddening persistency. What, I wondered, could be the explanation ? Was it possible that Reddie's colleague could have blundered hopelessly in his appreciation of the actual facts ? I got little comfort from that speculation ; it was impossible to imagine that any one with any sense of responsibility in him at all could have stigmatized a great player as a coward unless he had unimpeachable evidence to that effect. No, the facts must be accepted as reported, and Julian for some unexplained reason must have momentarily lost his nerve.

Yet, such an occurrence was utterly inconsistent with my knowledge of the man ; I had seen him play many a grimly-fought game in representative football of all kinds, and though he was not always strung to concert pitch, he had never put up anything but a plucky show. Also I remembered his rescue of Nigel from certain death ; as gallant a feat as any swimmer had ever brought off at the risk of his own life. The more I thought of the incident, the more inexplicable it became, and I cursed the untoward fate that kept me pinned to my chair. If I could only

have got out of it and done something, I might have been able to exorcize the demon of unpleasant and undesired thought from my mind.

It was not so much Julian's lapse itself that worried me; it was rather the indefinable fear I felt of the effect that lapse might have on his somewhat over-sensitive mind. To have let his side down in an all important match he would look upon as the unpardonable sin, and such remorse as he would assuredly feel could not fail to be deepened by the realization that the occurrence would be known to the whole sporting world. It was a kindly world, as few knew better than Julian himself; a world which would be sorry for him even while it blamed, and which would always be ready to give a good fellow another chance. But I doubted whether such a reflection as this—granted that it occurred to his mind—would afford him much consolation. If I read his character aright, he was the sort of man who was always too hard upon himself, if only for the reason that he knew how fatally easy it might be for him to adopt the opposite course. Yes, it looked as if the poor chap was in for a pretty thin time, even though his nearest and dearest friends rallied as far as he would let them to his side. It was the least we older folk could do, and I had no qualms about our conduct. As for the younger generation, Nigel and the rest of the Balbirny family would stick to their friend through thick and thin, while Daphne—well—I could imagine Daphne going further still in her sorrow for the man.

And at that thought I felt a bit uncomfortable myself; I wasn't at all sure I should approve of anything in the nature of an engagement between the two. Not that my approval or disapproval would make much difference; Daphne was twenty-one, and had her wits about her. She was rightfully entitled to liberty of choice. And somehow, I didn't think she'd make a mistake, whatever she chose to do. Whereupon I cheered up mightily, and took up *The Onlooker*, and found that superior paper patting itself on the back, as it occasionally does, for something it had, or had not, said six months before. After all, I might have been making a mountain out of

a molehill over the whole confounded business, and my wisest plan was to wait quietly until my alarms and excursions into the realms of conjecture had either been corroborated or laid to rest by people who had probably been in an excellent position to observe the incident as it had actually occurred.

Daphne brought her guests home shortly after five o'clock, and the whole party invaded my little library for tea. Tom and Alice with their two daughters and Nigel all put in an appearance, and promptly fell to discussing the match with as keen a relish for its more outstanding merits and demerits as that with which they proceeded to tuck into the meal. As they all spoke at once, like so many magpies, it was no easy matter to take in everything they said, but I gathered they considered that a draw very fairly represented the general run of the play.

'That seems to have been a great effort on England's part at the end of the game,' I said, seizing the earliest opportunity I got of putting in a word, and bringing the discussion nearer to the point in which I was so greatly interested. 'At least, from what Cosmo Reddie said, it was a splendid bout of passing that led to Hawkins scoring his try.'

'Yes, he played a topping game from start to finish,' exclaimed Nan Balbirny enthusiastically, 'and thoroughly deserved to get it.'

'You're right, Nan,' Nigel concurred, 'all the more so because it was a case of touch and go with him. Julian was coming across, Uncle Colin, like a streak of greased lightning, and could only have missed him by six inches, if as much.'

I saw Tom Balbirny glance at his son with an air of surprise, but he said nothing and it was his younger daughter, Joan, who now chipped in. 'Well, I don't agree with you,' she said. 'To be quite candid, I've a bone to pick with Master Julian; he'll have to explain to me what he meant by going for Hawkins's head instead of collaring him low.'

'Rot!' retorted Nigel, with brotherly disdain for a sister's opinion. 'You're only a little flapper, and, if

that's all you know about the game, I can't see why the old man throws his money away on buying you a ticket for the stand. I tell you I saw the whole thing clearly, because I was standing up on my seat, and it was only by taking a flying leap into the air at the end of his sprint that Julian got anywhere near his man at all.'

'All right! don't get excited,' replied Joan, who was not in the least perturbed and had the courage of her sixteen year old convictions. 'All I said was that I'd a bone to pick with Julian, and I'm going to pick it.'

'Better not, old lady,' said her father at this point. 'I don't suppose Julian's feeling any too pleased about it as it is, and you never make matters any better by treading on people's corns.'

Joan, with a quaint little *moue* of dissent, subsided for the moment, and Tom turned to me. 'I don't know that I thought much of the game,' he said, somewhat brusquely. 'The second half was merely less of a scramble than the first, and, as neither side honestly deserved to win, I wasn't altogether disappointed with the result. The old game we used to play,' he went on, with a wink in my direction, 'may not have been as spectacular as the modern variety, but I'm hanged if I don't think it had its good points, as a game.'

He has reason to know that this sort of remark reduces his family to the verge of fury. There was a howl of protest, which was only ended by Daphne removing them forcibly to another room and so leaving me alone with Tom and Alice. I have reported but a smattering of the conversation which had taken place, but it will perhaps have been noticed that Daphne had not delivered herself of any comment, good, bad, or indifferent on Julian's behaviour. Whether this omission portended good or ill for him I was at a loss to conjecture. But I wanted badly to get at the truth of the matter, and so did not scruple to tell Tom and his wife exactly what I had heard. And I finished up by demanding an explanation from one or both of them.

It was Tom who answered first. 'I don't know what to say,' he blurted out, 'but the plain fact is that Julian's exhibition to-day would have disgraced a player with half

an eye and only one leg. Yes, my dear,' he went on, patting the restraining hand which his wife had placed on his arm. 'I know there may be a hundred reasons why he failed, but I'm telling Cohn what I saw. It's no good trying to hush the thing up when eighty thousand people saw it, too. Why, the attempt he made to collar Hawkins was the best thing he did all through the game, and you'll know how good that was, Cohn, when I swear to you that he could easily have stopped him, if he'd gone for his legs. Instead of which, he made a feeble grab at his neck--and the harm was done. If I hadn't seen the thing with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it, and still less would I repeat it to you.' Here he snorted indignantly, as if daring me to contradict his words.

Then Alice--golden hearted and silver tongued Alice--took up her tale. 'Yes,' she said. 'Tom's account is only too true, but what I can't make him see is that the excessive feebleness of Julian's whole performance must be a sure proof that there was something radically wrong with Julian himself. If his failure to collar Hawkins at the end of the game had been a solitary and exceptional incident, I should have nothing to say, but, as things went, I'm convinced that I'm right in my views and that we shall find out shortly that the poor fellow was--and probably is--very far from fit. I only hope he's not seriously ill.'

Tom snorted again, though not so confidently this time. 'Then, if he was so ill,' he grumbled, 'he ought never to have turned out.'

'I daresay there was considerable pressure put upon him to do so,' retorted Alice, with a smile. And before she had finished speaking, a recollection of that little frown which had passed over Hubert Brett's face when he and Daphne had been talking about Julian flashed into my mind.

'It's just possible that there's something in what Alice says,' I remarked, and told them of the incident. 'The doctor is sure to look in to-morrow, and I'll ask him what the frown meant. He may be able to throw a little light on the subject.'

'Any way, our present job is to stand by Julian,' said

Alice decisively. 'And that applies to you, Tom, as much as anyone,' she went on, patting him on the head. 'We should never forgive ourselves if afterwards we found out we had misjudged him hopelessly. He'll be up against it badly for a bit, whatever happens, and I don't like to think of him having to go through the ordeal awaiting him to-night. Fancy having to dine and go to a dance——'

'By Jove, yes,' Tom interrupted, 'I hadn't thought of that. Well, if he's got any sense, he'll make some excuse and stay away. By the by, did that obnoxious woman next door go to the match by any chance?' 'D'you know, Colin?'

'I believe not,' I replied, with a sympathetic grin. Tom is a pleasantly aggressive person whose bark is infinitely worse than his bite; he's always quite happy if the said bark is recognized and rated at its true value by his friends.

'That's good,' he said. 'I wonder if she gets an evening paper? Because, if so, she'll be pouring out a flood of unctuous sympathy all over the miserable Julian in a way which would drive me to drink if I were in his place. He'd be better to go to the dance rather than spend the evening in a kind of Turkish bath of sloppy sentimentality. The woman ought to read Kipling, and learn a bit of commonsense; he's got a poem eminently suited to cases such as hers.'

'Tom, Tom,' said Alice reprovingly, 'you know you're only talking like that because you're sorry for Julian in your heart of hearts, and would like to help him if you only knew how. Well, any personal help we can give must come later. At the moment he must fight his battles by himself, poor boy. Isn't that so, Colin?' she asked, turning to me.

'That's the feeling I have myself,' I replied—a little sadly, for I would have liked to have done something for the fellow straightaway.

This remark of mine brought the discussion on Julian to an end, and by mutual consent we passed to other topics of conversation which lasted until the Balbirnys had to leave. Nigel stayed on and dined with us, and after that meal was taken upstairs by Daphne to play billiards.

He did not, however, remain as long as usual, leaving the house about half-past nine. I wondered whether they had broached the question of Julian together, for at dinner by a kind of subconscious and tacit agreement the subject had been absolutely taboo. Well, if Daphne wanted to say anything to me about it, doubtless she would do so in her own good time. I felt that any prompting on my part might be unwelcome at the moment, and so made up my mind to pursue a policy of masterly inactivity—*pas trop de zèle* is, I have always found, a maxim of some worth.

She came into the library about ten, seated herself on the arm of my chair, and, as is her wont, went straight to the point. 'I've just been round next door,' she announced, with a note of indignation in her voice. 'I wanted to find out whether Effie knew anything about this unfortunate breakdown of Julian's this afternoon or not, so that if she did, she could work off the worst of her feelings of self-pity on me and not on him. I found her in tears, and Mr. Sadde administering what I suppose he would call spiritual consolation. I also found out that, if it hadn't been for him, she wouldn't have known anything about the business at all. He had dropped in after dinner—pulling a long face, I don't doubt—for the express purpose of condoling with her, and had let the cat out of the bag.' She broke off with a sudden smile, as if the humour of the situation had just struck her. 'Of course, he saved me a lot of trouble,' she resumed thoughtfully, 'and Effie was really enjoying herself no end, though, if the Churches had the sense to consider their real interests, they'd make short work of padres of the type of Mr.—I beg his pardon—I should have said Father Aloysius Sadde. What do you think of him, Dad, now, honestly and as man to man?'

I laughed at her way of putting it. 'Honestly,' I replied, 'I don't know much about him, but from what little I have seen of him, I would not trust him far out of my sight. Anyhow, he did you a good turn to-night, and I suspect he knows just how to minister to a mind diseased, like Effie's is, and can twist her round his somewhat chubby little finger. As to what his real purpose may

be in doing so, only he—and the God he serves—can know. Maybe he thinks that by pandering to her childish propensities he can bring peace to her unstable mind. To my way of thinking, your method of listening to her numerous woes without any particular show of sympathy in return for her confidences, which you don't want and have never encouraged, is more honest, more wholesome, and in the end more curative for her than ever his is likely to be. Look here, Daphne, you said that you supposed it was spiritual comfort he was administering to her. What did you mean by that ?

'Well, you see, I ran straight up to the drawing-room and went in without knocking, as I always do. Mr. Sadde was seated on the edge of an armchair near the fire, leaning forward a bit with his hands on Effie's head. She was kneeling on a great, soft buffet in front of him, with her face in her hands and sobbing her heart out. They both jumped up quickly enough—a little too quickly, I thought—when I appeared, and leapt about four yards away from one another. You know, Dad, I'm afraid I'm rather an unregenerate person, but for the life of me I couldn't help spotting the ludicrous side of it all, though I was a bit annoyed, too, at both of them making such idiots of themselves. Anyhow, when Mr. Sadde came forward to shake hands and murmured something about "our dear lady being terribly upset by Julian's misfortune," I fairly burst out laughing. And I was unladylike enough to try and excuse my conduct by saying that, if they could only have seen themselves, they would have burst out laughing too. Rather to my surprise, Mr. Sadde took the remark fairly well. He smiled a sort of sickly smile, and confessed that there was often but a thin dividing line between the sublime and the ridiculous. Effie was distinctly pceved, and inclined to take on the manner of the huffed. But when I asked her what Mr. Sadde meant by Julian's misfortune, she perked up quite a bit, and talked a lot of what Nigel calls "tripe"—I do, too, for that matter—about the disgrace he had brought on Scotland, and the Scrimgeour name. I let her run on till she was nearly out of breath, and then I butted in. "My dear Effie," I said, "Julian certainly played the rottenest game

of his whole career ; I can't deny that, but it's rubbish to say that he either disgraced Scotland or your precious name. Nigel and I have been talking the matter over, and we have come to the conclusion that either Julian was suffering from some sort of illness that had taken him suddenly or that he had been deliberately hounded in the same way as crooks will sometimes dope a horse before a race." This expression of our opinion made her sit up, I can tell you, and gave her and the Reverend Father something to think about. I left them to their discussion, after listening as long as I could bear to priestly lucubrations on the awful sins of the times. But before coming away, I very strongly advised Effie to wait up for Julian, and, if she saw he was at all queer, to send post-haste for Doctor Brett. Whether or not she'll carry out my advice I don't know ; I rather imagine it will depend on whether her father-confessor backs me up, or finds out her particular wishes —and hands me the hot end of the poker. Anyhow, I did my best, and as there didn't seem to be any immediate prospect of Effie making up what she calls her mind, I hopped it, and *me voilà*, or if you'd rather have it in the vernacular, here I am !

She looked down at me, her eyes alight with a sense of fun, her mouth broken up with smiles, the adorable dimple she had inherited from her mother nestling in her left cheek, and seemed, notwithstanding all her sturdy independence of character, to crave immediate approval of what she had done from my lips. But my legal training has made me chary of yielding with anything like indecent haste to the disarming blandishments of even a most charming and well-beloved daughter. Besides, in spite of the superficial gaiety of her speech and manner, I had a sort of intuitive feeling that not very deep below the sparkle of its surface there might be a muddy under-current of anxiety, and, possibly, of alarm. And truly, the description of her visit next door had given me food for thought on three particular points.

Firstly, was it within the realms of possibility that the idea of Julian being doped might not be a figment of the imagination but a definite, if sufficiently startling fact ? If it was, then I foresaw that we might all too soon find

ourselves involved in an eminently undesirable adventure amid the tortuous by-ways of intrigue or even crime. A prospect which, as I admitted frankly to myself, held no allurements whatsoever for a staid and respectable Edinburgh W.S.

Secondly, what interpretation but one could I put upon Daphne's account of the tableau 'featuring Effie Scrimgeour and Father Aloysius Sadde,' of which she had been so unexpected and innocent a witness? As an ordinary man of the world, I could only conclude that, whatever good or evil motives might be influencing the man, he had by this time succeeded in getting a foolish and—as I shrewdly suspected—a sex-obsessed woman pretty well under his thumb. Well, it really didn't very much matter what her intentions for the future might be, but, as a trustee of Harry Scrimgeour's estate, it behoved me to make a few judicious inquiries as to the gentleman's antecedents. Another unpleasant little complication, which, again, had no attractions for me at all.

And thirdly, could I have gauged the real extent of Daphne's feelings towards Julian from anything she had said? Was she merely sorry like the rest of his old friends for the calamity which had come upon him, or was she hiding a sorely-wrung heart beneath a reckless flippancy of speech? For the moment I could no more have answered these questions than I could have flown, but I heartily wished I could have found myself in a position to do so. For, once the enigma was solved, I should know where I was and could act accordingly. At which point of my meditations it suddenly struck me that Daphne might herself be experiencing difficulties similar to my own; between Nigel and Julian she, too, might not know where she was. Just now, however, there she sat perched on the arm of my chair and regarding me with an expression of mingled puzzlement and impatience. The thoughts I have recorded had naturally passed through my mind far more speedily than I have been able to write them down, but there was some excuse for her demeanour.

'Well,' she said, archly and a trifle imperiously, 'what's the great thought—or thoughts?'

'I will try and tell you honestly and as between man

and man,' I answered, and forthwith proceeded to lay my speculations regarding one and two unreservedly before her. When I had finished, I asked whether she and Nigel had any definite reason for suggesting that Julian had been doped.

'If you mean—"did we actually see the dope administered?"—the answer is in the negative,' she replied. 'But, when the teams were leaving the field, Nigel got pretty near to the man and swears that Julian had a dazed look in his eyes and didn't appear to know where he was going. Craigie had him by the arm, and was piloting him along.'

'I take it that Julian went to the dinner after the match, and is probably at the Palais de Danse now?'

'So I gathered from Ethie.'

'And what's become of Nigel?'

'Oh, he went off to the Palais, too. He told me he was hoping to get hold of Julian after the show was over. He thought he might see him home, and, if it wasn't too late, he said he'd look in here and give us the latest bulletin from the front. His last injunction to me was not to sit up later than twelve o'clock. He said there was no point in my remaining out of my little warm cot after that, and promised faithfully he'd call in here on his way to the office in the morning.'

'Surely he doesn't go to the office on Sunday?'

'No, of course not. We must both have been so worried generally that we quite forgot about the day.'

'Well, if that's the case, we needn't fuss too much about things just now. After all, there may be some quite simple explanation of Julian's curious lapse from form this afternoon, and I'm dead against making anything in the nature of wild conjecture. By the way, Daphne, did you happen to see much of him this past week?'

'Let me see,' she pondered a moment, and then went on.

'No,' she said, 'I think I only saw him twice. I met him in Princes Street—on Monday morning, I think it was—but he was in such a hurry that he hadn't time to give me more than a nod and a smile; and I lunched with him at Fenner's on Thursday.'

'Was he all right then?'

'Yes, as far as I saw. A bit excited, perhaps—you know his way—over a notion he'd got in his head about a new book. He talked a lot about it, and told me he'd already written four chapters.'

'A novel?'

'No. It was to be a learned treatise on the psychology of crime. He's collaborating with Christie Pittendriech—you know, the famous private detective.'

'Is he? Well, that's good news. I know the man fairly well; I've had occasion to employ him more than once, and always with great benefit to my clients and myself. He's as smart as they make 'em, and if he's been working with Julian, he's sure to have noticed whether there was anything queer or wrong about the man. We'll get hold of him to-morrow and find out what he knows, or, if he doesn't know anything, at any rate what he thinks.'

Daphne nodded cheerfully, and then sat silently for so long a time that I glanced up at her in surprise. 'Anything more worrying you, old girl?' I asked.

She gave a little sigh. 'I was only thinking what a rotten time Julian must have gone through to-day,' she said.

'Daphne, are you—I stammered a bit, and then broke off altogether in a sheepish sort of way—it was not easy to ask the question that was hovering on my lips. To an old-fashioned buffer like myself it almost seemed as if I were treading on holy ground.

But that's not the way the new generation looks at the matter, and I'm not at all sure that theirs isn't the healthier plan. 'Dear old thing,' laughed Daphne, slipping an arm round my neck, 'I am and I'm not, and he is and he isn't, if you understand what I mean. I'm like a stag on the Stock Exchange, or like a politician sitting on the fence, or like Mr. Facing-both-ways in the jolly old *P.P.*, with Julian pulling me in one direction and Nigel in the other. They both tug so hard sometimes that I feel as if I were being rent in twain. That, if it were poss., might be a solution of the difficulty, but it can't be done. So, meantime, I'm rather glad to have the care of a kindly old gentleman on my shoulders, who, I think, would be rather lost without his daughter's protecting wings.'

I passed my arm round her waist, and drew her down to me. I felt a sense of relief at her statement, since it convinced me that she was as yet heart-whole, and I knew only too well that her marriage would mean a big blank in my life. But it was also only too possible, as I reflected, turning aside from my selfish thoughts, that Julian's misfortune might tip the scale in his favour, and it was on the tip of my tongue to put in a good word for Nigel. But, wisely as I think, I held my tongue, and presently consented to hobble on my crutches up to bed. And there I lay and read a book until Daphne came in at midnight and told me that Nigel had not turned up. His non-appearance we took to be of good omen, and it was in a much more cheery state of mind that I switched off the light and almost immediately fell asleep.

I have always been a very sound sleeper, and that night my slumbers must have been so profound that I had the greatest difficulty in collecting my wits when I became aware that somebody was shaking me with what I was inclined to think was quite unnecessary vigour. I opened my eyes unwillingly to find Daphne standing by my bed. Her words, however, as soon as I took them in, had the immediate effect of making me sit bolt upright.

'Wake up, Dad,' she was saying, 'wake up! Effie has just telephoned through to say that Julian did not come home last night, and that there's been a burglary at the house into the bargain!'

CHAPTER III

I OBSERVED that my daughter was attired in a pink silk dressing-gown with a shingle-cap to match. 'What's the time?' was my first question to her.

'Ten minutes to eight,' she replied promptly. 'Effie's half off her head, and very anxious to come round and see you as soon as she's dressed.'

'Well, before you get dressed yourself,' I said, 'just ring her up, and tell her to do nothing foolish—nothing at all, that is, until she has had a talk with me. Wrap it up as nicely as you like, but make her understand that she's not to do anything likely to court publicity at the present moment. There may be no connexion between Julian's absence and the burglary,' I went on, my brain beginning to function rapidly, 'but on the other hand, it's by no means an impossibility. Then look up Pittendriech's number, and get through to him. Ask him to come round here as soon as he conveniently can, and tell him he can have breakfast with us.'

'You think something serious may have happened to Julian?' Daphne asked anxiously, as she moved towards the door.

'It's impossible to say, darling,' I replied as cheerily as I could, though my mind misgave me on the point. 'Anyhow, though there may not be much wrong, I think we shall do nothing but good getting Pittendriech to work as quickly as we can. In cases like this, difficulties almost always arise from delay in starting inquiries, and that delay I propose to avoid. Cut along and ring them both up; tell Effie if you think it won't upset her too much that I've sent for the detective. Meantime, I'll get up and be down to breakfast as smartly as I can.'

Cursing my confounded foot which impeded my movements considerably, I hurried into my clothes and, as a matter of fact, reached the dining-room well inside fifteen minutes. As I propelled myself through the door, a slightly-built, extremely-thin little man, who had been standing with his back to the fire, came forward with outstretched hand. To my surprise I saw it was Christie Pittendriech, for I had not thought it possible that he could have covered the distance between our respective houses in the time at his disposal. I shook hands cordially with him, and must confess that the sight of his pale but intelligent countenance with its keen grey eyes and its determined mouth brought an immediate sense of relief to my worried mind. Somebody—I forget who it was—had once likened him to a scaly old vulture, and the description was by no means unjust. He possessed a great

beak instead of a nose, and his every movement, nay, even his very manner of speech, betrayed the alertness of that particular bird.

'I got your message, Mr. Blair,' he said, glancing at my bandaged foot as he spoke, 'just as I was leaving my house. So I jumped into a passing taxi and came straight along. What can I do for you?'

'Unfortunately, my summons to you has nothing to do with my accident,' I replied, noting the glance. 'I only wish it had. No, I've asked you to come here on a very different matter. There may be nothing in it—I must honestly tell you that—and, if the whole business turns out to be moonshine, well, so much the better. But the fact is that two incidents have just been brought to my notice which are—shall we say?—at least sufficiently out of the ordinary to cause me some anxiety.'

'When you say "just been brought to your notice," do you mean this morning?' he interrupted.

'Yes, a minute or so before we rang you up. And as one of these incidents concerns, well, I suppose I may say a mutual friend of ours, I——'

'A mutual friend? Who is that?'

'Julian Scrimgeour.'

'Julian Scrimgeour!' he echoed the name in what struck me as a tone of annoyance and surprise. 'Pardon my curiosity, Mr. Blair, but how did you come to know that Scrimgeour was a friend of mine?'

I looked at Pittendrieck with some little amazement, for I couldn't exactly fathom the drift of his question. 'I did not know it until last night,' I retorted, a little stiffly, 'but I took leave to guess that you and he would hardly be collaborating over a book unless you were fairly well acquainted with one another.'

This answer seemed to annoy him still further, for he frowned very heavily indeed. 'Did he actually tell you that?' he demanded, in an accent which betokened as clearly as if he had spoken the actual words that he would be astounded to receive an answer in the affirmative.

I wondered what on earth he was getting at. If this was his usual method of procedure, it was a shade too hectoring for my taste. I should have preferred a more

conciliatory manner. But I suddenly recollected having been told that a good deal of his professional success had depended on the way in which he had been accustomed to overawe people by a brutal display of truculence. Well, if he got at the truth and so served the interests of justice, his methods mattered little enough, and his manner didn't concern me more than a twopenny toss.

'He didn't actually tell *me*,' I replied casually. 'He actually told Miss Blair—my daughter.'

'Your daughter?' Pittendrieck repeated the words sharply and as if he were still rather put out. 'Ah! I see,' he went on, adopting a kindlier tone and smiling towards me suggestively, 'she and he are——?'

'Very old and very firm friends, Mr. Pittendrieck,' I cut in decisively. 'Nothing more than that.'

He looked keenly at me for a moment, and then broke out into a kind of laughing croak. 'I must beg your pardon, Mr. Blair,' he said. 'I am forgetting that I am talking to a lawyer, and my brow-beating tactics will not likely go down with you. As a matter of fact, I think I owe you an explanation of my conduct—and that explanation I'm very ready to give. I am free to confess that I have seldom been so taken aback in my life as I was when you alluded to Scrimgeour as being our mutual friend except, perhaps, when you added that he had told Miss Blair about our projected book. And I am certain you will agree that I have some reason to feel not only taken aback but also more than a trifle annoyed when I assure you that I only consented to help him with his book—it was to be on the psychology of the criminal mind—as a result of his solemn promise that neither my name nor my connexion with the book should in any way be divulged to a single soul. I had my reasons for insisting on these conditions, they had to do with my business, and I need not detail them to you, but so strongly did they appeal to me that I had also urged upon him the necessity of keeping even our acquaintanceship more or less a secret from his friends. You may judge, then, of my astonishment when you calmly alluded to both the acquaintanceship and the book a minute or two ago.'

To say that I was thunderstruck when I heard these

accusations is to describe my sensations mildly enough. It was incredible that the Julian I had known all his life—first as an upright boy and then as a strictly honourable man—should have so far soiled his reputation as to have gone back so disgracefully on his spoken word. But, taken into consideration along with his yesterday's performance and his unaccountable failure to return home, Pittendrieich's statement convinced me that the only feasible explanation of such unsportsmanlike conduct on Julian's part was to be sought for and found in some form of mental aberration. And from that moment I began to fear that before very long we should inevitably discover that the poor fellow was floundering in very deep waters indeed.

I turned to the detective, who had crossed the room and was standing with his back to me looking out of the window, and, 'Mr. Pittendrieich,' I said, 'I do not wish to appear discourteous, but the revelation you have just made seems to me so utterly foreign to all my preconceived ideas of Scrimgeour's character that I am compelled to ask you whether you are possessed of any more substantial proof of your accusations than—er—your mere statement can legally be held to be?'

He swung round on his heel, and came and stood by the fire again. 'I don't doubt you are feeling upset, Mr. Blair,' he answered, 'but let me assure you I take no offence at what I can only consider is a justifiable precaution on your part. I am really sorry to have to add to your distress, but I have documentary evidence at home in support of my words. This agreement, which was drawn up and signed by both of us and witnessed by Gavin Murdoch, who, as I daresay you may know, is a not unimportant person on the staff of *The Caledonian*, I shall be glad to show you at any time.' He broke off, and then shot a sudden and unexpected question at me. 'I suppose you weren't at the match yesterday, were you?' he asked.

'No, my wretched foot kept me in the house, but I've heard a good deal about Scrimgeour's disastrous exhibition. Did you see the game?'

'Yes, I was there,' he replied, 'but only until half-time. Still, that was long enough to show me that Scrimgeour,

instead of being an asset as usual, was nothing but a handicap to his side. To me it seemed as if he were almost fuddled with drink or dope of some kind, but now that you've put me wise about—shall we say?—er—his indiscretions, I'm inclined to change my opinion.'

'You are hinting at some mental trouble?'

'Well, I'm bound to say it looks rather like it. But just now I prefer to stick to facts. Theories can come later, when we know a little more. You were going to tell me something with reference to Scrimgeour—what was it?'

'Merely this,' I answered shortly, 'that he has not been home all night.'

He received this piece of information quite calmly. 'Was he expected home?' he asked.

'Yes. His mother rang me up—just before I got through to you—in great distress because he hadn't turned up. They live next door, you know.'

'Yes, I know. Well, while the fact may be of the utmost significance, it may, on the other hand, mean absolutely nothing at all.'

'True. As an isolated incident I agree it cuts no particular ice, but, taken with the burglary which occurred there during his absence, it strikes me as being something more than a mere coincidence.'

This information disturbed his cast-iron equilibrium a bit more. 'What?' he exclaimed, with a ringing note of excitement in his rather rasping voice. But before he could add another syllable, the door opened, and Daphne, followed by the waitress bringing in the breakfast dishes, came into the room.

I introduced the one to the other. 'Miss Blair,' I said, 'Mr. Pittendriech.'

Daphne shook hands with our visitor in her frank, almost boyish, way. 'I'm glad you've been able to come along so soon,' she said. 'I think Dad's unnecessarily anxious over the whole business, but I know Mrs. Scrimgeour's worrying herself into an early grave, so I'm looking to you to put things right. Is the Holmes touch going strong this morning, or does it peter out on the Sabbath day?'

Pittendriech's grim countenance relaxed into a pleasant

smile. 'It's always on tap, Miss Blair,' he retorted, without the slightest hesitation. 'For instance, you have just paid a flying visit of condolence to Mrs. Scrimgeour next door, and she has told you something that has caused you considerable surprise.'

Daphne stared at him with widely-opened eyes. 'You've scored a bull's-eye right off—twice running,' she admitted candidly. 'But you don't catch me playing the Watsonian game; I'm taking no such risk.' She smiled brightly on the detective, and then transferred her attention to me. 'What about a spot or two of breakfast?' she asked in her slangy but distinctly attractive way.

We sat down to table, and for a short time busied ourselves with the meal. But, in spite of Daphne's cheery chatter, it could hardly be called a success. There was a skeleton sitting at the feast, of the which we were most painfully aware. Presently, as there was no use ignoring the unpleasant fact, I returned—reluctantly enough—to the subject which was uppermost in our thoughts.

'When,' I asked Daphne, 'do you think we may expect Effie round here? That's Mrs. Scrimgeour, Pittendrieck,' I added in explanation to him.

'Well, that depends on how long she takes to get herself suitably up for the occasion,' my flippant daughter replied, a little scornfully, as I thought. 'When I was with her just now she was still in her *robe de chambre*, busily engaged in routing out the old family mourning.'

Pittendrieck laughed out aloud. 'The lady seems to be gifted with an unwholesome kind of imagination,' he said. 'By the way, Mr. Blair,' he went on, 'd'you think I might send a message round asking her to leave everything untouched and just as it was left by the departing burglar?'

'Certainly; I'll scribble a note to her myself.'

Daphne provided me with paper and pencil, and I dashed off the note in a few lines. Then, having despatched it to its destination at the hands of the waitress, we went on with breakfast. And we had just about finished the meal when, following a thunderous rat-tat-tat on the dining-room door, which could only have signalized the arrival of one person in our little world, it was thrown briskly open, and there was Nigel Balbirny standing grinning on the threshold.

'Hello! people,' he exclaimed. 'I know I dined and wined—wisely and not too well—here last night, but I could trifle with a grilled kidney or two, so to speak, on the morning after the night. May I come in?'

'You're a bit late for the loaves and fishes, my lad,' said Daphne.

'But, doubtless, a few fragments remain,' suggested Nigel hopefully. 'But why this indecent hurry on a day of rest?' he inquired, coming right into the room.

As he did so, he caught sight of our guest, and halted abruptly. 'Sorry,' he said, 'I didn't know—as they say in the best circles—that you had company here.'

'Let me introduce you,' laughed Daphne. 'Mr. Pittendriech, this is Mr. Nigel Balbirny. As a potential criminal, like all the rest of us, I ask you to take particular notice of him. You may find it useful later on.'

The words were spoken lightly enough, for Daphne was hiding an anxious heart behind a smiling countenance, but I and her other hearers had good cause to remember them before many days had gone. But—with apologies for this digression—as soon as Nigel heard the name, he strode over to where the detective was sitting and held out his hand.

'Mr. Pittendriech,' he exclaimed, and there was no mistaking the look of genuine interest on his face, 'I've often heard of your exploits, but never imagined I'd have the chance of meeting you. I'm jolly glad to make your acquaintance.'

Pittendriech got up from the table and shook hands heartily. He could hardly have done otherwise after so handsome and spontaneous a tribute to his reputation. But I, who had been watching him carefully out of the corner of my eye, had seen how bored he was with the tomfoolery going on. I put him down as one of those men whose sole passion in life is centred round their work, and I suspected him of being deficient in any real sense of humour. But it is only fair to say that he reacted readily enough to Nigel's obvious pleasure.

'Miss Blair seems to be a little too hard on you, Mr. Balbirny,' he said, 'but you can at least take comfort from the fact that we are all included in her general category.'

'Yes,' said Daphne, pouring out a cup of coffee for the young man, 'and that reminds me, Nigel, that you kept me out of my bed till after twelve last night. What about it?'

'Very sorry and all that,' he responded in lugubrious tones, helping himself at the same time to eggs and bacon, 'but the fact is I just managed to toddle home myself an hour or two before the arrival of the morning milk. To speak less in parables, I only bade Julian a fatherly "good night" about one a.m.—at the bottom of the Mound, I believe it was—and, judging it then too late to be paying calls, I went, as the crow flies, straight to my rooms. And talking of Julian, have you by any chance heard how it is with the old chap this morning?'

I thought it well to answer this question myself. 'I'm sorry to say, Nigel, that Julian did not come home,' I said. 'Which, incidentally, accounts for Mr. Pittendriech being here. I thought it advisable to call in his assistance because I'm more than a bit worried about the matter. Moreover, not only did Julian not come home, but there was a burglary next door last night as well.'

'Good Lord!' exclaimed Nigel, and his whole bearing and demeanour at once became more serious. 'But I——!' he began, and then came to a sudden stop. 'What on earth can Julian have been doing?' he finished up.

'That's just what we want to find out, Mr. Balbirny,' said Pittendriech, who had been eyeing his man with what appeared to me to be a look of impatient disapproval, and who now spoke as if he felt that he had to deal with a sort of harmless and inconsequent ass. For which treatment Nigel had, in very truth, only himself to blame. 'Perhaps you'll be able to help us, as you seem to have been in contact with Scrimgeour not many hours ago.'

Nigel laid down his knife and fork, and regarded the speaker with a friendly air. 'About eight, to be exact,' he said. 'What more can I tell you?'

'Well, first of all, how long were you with him last night?'

'About two hours, more or less.'

'Long enough for you to have formed a fairly sound idea of the mental condition he was in?'

'Certainly.'

'Would you describe him as having been quite normal?'

'Not by a long chalk. Some of the time I was with him, he—well—he was much in the same state as a fellow I remember at school who had been biffed on the head with a cricket ball. Didn't seem even to know his own name and where he was and all that. When I first took him over outside the Palais de Danse from Craigie, who had been jolly decent looking after him, I wanted him to come straight home as Craigie advised. But there was nothing doing. So we stravaiged about the streets for about three-quarters of an hour, when he suddenly became very excited and insisted on my going with him to call on one of his pals. We spent an hour or so over that job, and then, as I said, I finally parted from him at the foot of the Mound about one a.m.'

'But, surely, Nigel, he wasn't fit to be left alone?' I broke in at this point, being sorely puzzled to account for such apparently callous conduct on his part.

'No, he wasn't, Uncle Colin. Nor did I leave him till I had to.'

'What d'you mean?' asked Daphne eagerly. 'You said you left him at one a.m.'

I saw Nigel wince at the remark, but he pulled himself together and—'Well, old girl,' he went on, 'it's a bit difficult to explain. You see, after we left his pal's flat, he became more and more heated and—er—pugnacious, and seemed bent on picking a quarrel with me. Told me in the end to go to—er—blazes, and followed up his injunction by letting me have one on the side of the head. That fairly put the lid on it, for I could see by this time that my presence was only increasing his irritation. So I looked round to see if I could get some one to help me, but it was a foul night and there didn't appear to be anybody about. While I was doing this, he started to walk away from me at a good round pace. I let him get about a hundred yards ahead, and then followed him. He kept looking round to see if he were being pursued, and I thought it wise not to be near enough to him to be recognized. He made straight in this direction, and only on one or two occasions was he out of my sight. One of these occasions was when he had

just turned into this very crescent and I was still in Cromdale Place. I lost a few seconds then, because I trod on some beastly hard little object which slithered along the wet pavement under my foot and carried me along with it. I went a bit of a purler, but I was up again in a moment and round the corner just in time to see Julian disappearing into his house.'

When Nigel had finished his tale, I leant forward and grasped his hand. 'Sorry, old man,' I said, 'I might have known you'd have played the game.'

He grinned back awkwardly, and then Pittendriech's harsh voice broke in once more.

'You are sure you saw Scrimgeour go into the house?' he asked.

'Quite.'

'You couldn't have been mistaken?'

'No.'

'What did you do then?'

'Well, I didn't quite know what to do. It was about half-past one, and I didn't want to disturb either these people here or Mrs. Scrimgeour next door—she's rather a nervous woman, Mr. Pittendriech. So I decided that the best thing I could do was to hang about for an hour or two just in case Julian took it into his head to break loose again. I did hang about till ten minutes to three, when, as nothing had happened, I thought it would be safe to let things be till this morning. It appears that I was wrong; I ought to have hung on a bit longer.'

'No, no. It seems to me that you did as much as could be expected of any man,' said Pittendriech. 'Now, Mr. Balbirny, you spoke of having had a quarrel with Scrimgeour—may I ask what it was about?'

Nigel glanced quickly at me. 'Need I answer that question, Uncle Colin?' he asked, and added earnestly, 'I'd very much rather not.'

'There is no need to answer anything, my boy, if you don't want to,' I replied. 'There's no compulsion in the matter at all. Personally, I feel quite sure that you'll keep nothing back which might help us to clear up this miserable business.'

'I appreciate your loyalty, Mr. Balbirny,' said Pitten-

driech, 'but I would beg of you to remember that in all investigations of this kind the smallest straw may show the way the wind is blowing. However, perhaps you'll be good enough to answer another question. To whose flat did you and Scrimgeour go last night?'

Nigel got up from his chair, and paced quietly up and down the room. Then he came and faced the detective with a look of genuine distress in his expressive eyes. 'I was expecting that question, Mr. Pittendriech,' he said gravely, 'and I much regret to have to inform you that it is my resolute determination not to answer it.'

The detective nodded—at once a gesture of annoyance and disgust—while I, with an increasing sense of disquiet in my heart, looked anxiously at the lad. For it seemed to me that all this secrecy which was so alien to his nature could do nothing but excite suspicion in Pittendriech's mind and in consequence bring no possible benefit either to Julian or himself. For the moment I had forgotten that Daphne was in the room, so that the searching question she immediately put to him came as a bit of a shock.

'Would it make it any easier for you to answer either or both of these questions, my dear,' she asked, 'if I were to leave the room?'

There was an unwonted tenderness in her voice, which obviously moved Nigel to the centre of his being. 'Thank you, Daphne,' he replied, with a simple fervour which was most effective. 'No, your going would make no difference. If I could say anything at all, I would sooner say it to you than to anyone else in the world.'

There was silence in the room after he had spoken for quite half a minute. I think that neither Pittendriech nor I had a notion of what to say next, and I know I was relieved when the waitress appeared at the door and told Daphne that Mrs. Scrimgeour had again called her up on the telephone. She was away for only a short time, during which I remember wondering what we were to hear next. But I was assuredly not prepared for the amazing message my daughter delivered when she returned to the room.

'Here's the most astounding news!' she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with excitement and wonder. 'Effie

has just heard from a man at the post office, who has telephoned through a wire received there from Julian himself. I wrote it down so that there could be no mistake,' she went on, indicating a half-sheet of notepaper in her hand. 'Here it is—' Unexpectedly called away on urgent business. Will be away for a few days. Writing. Julian."

'Well, that's all right,' said Nigel joyfully. 'I——'

'Yes, but wait a moment,' Daphne interrupted, 'you haven't heard the extraordinary part yet. That wire was handed in at the G.P.O., London, this morning shortly after eight o'clock.'

CHAPTER IV

WE three men gazed at her in utter bewilderment, each of us, I doubt not, endeavouring to reconcile her statement with the facts of the case as they were at that moment known to us. It was Pittendriech who first recovered himself sufficiently to comment on the situation; naturally enough, he was only concerned with the matter from a strictly professional point of view, while Nigel and I were affected in a totally different way.

'Are you absolutely certain, Miss Blair, that the telegram was despatched from London?' he asked.

'That's what Mrs. Scrimgeour told me,' she replied. 'I was so flabbergasted myself when I got the information that I asked her three times whether she was sure it was correct.'

'Well,' said Pittendriech, 'if my interpretation of what has taken place is equally correct, it can only point in one direction. It can only point to the fact that Scrimgeour, whatever the mysterious business in which he is involved may turn out to be, must have been working with a confederate. But, mark you, a confederate who has done

a very foolish thing in sending that telegram. For *we* know, though I suppose Mrs. Scrimgeour doesn't—and the fellow must have been banking on that—that her son was seen by Mr. Balbirny here in Edinburgh as recently as one-thirty a.m. It is, therefore, manifestly impossible that he could have despatched the wire himself, though it appears to bear his signature.' He thought hard for a second or two, and then resumed his argument. 'The actual despatch of the telegram from London must have been prearranged—we can account for it by no other supposition—but I also think that Scrimgeour must have intended to travel up himself by the 10.50 last night, or, possibly, by one or other of the special trains the companies were running. If this surmise of mine is correct, then his intention must—or, at least, may—have been frustrated by his mental breakdown or whatever you like to call it. With the information before us at the moment I'm free to confess that I don't see much daylight. Till Miss Blair gave us her report, I admit I was inclined to believe that there was nothing in the case which might not have been explained by reference to Scrimgeour's mental condition. We all know there is no limit to the vagaries of anybody in such a state. But now I'm not so optimistic. I'm afraid the mystery is taking on a far deeper tinge.'

'What d'you think we ought to do?' I asked.

'Well, the first thing for me to carry out is a thorough investigation next door, and the sooner I set about it the better. It is possible, of course, that the burglary has nothing whatsoever to do with Scrimgeour's troubles—it may be quite independent of them, and there has been a fair amount of housebreaking in the town of late—but I'm suspicious that in this case there may be some connexion. Then, I should like to get from his mother, or, preferably, from you, some account of his recent movements and a detail or two about his friends and acquaintances. Any information that can help us to get on his track without delay is of the utmost importance, even supposing that he is only suffering from loss of memory or something of the kind.'

His tone was so serious that it was easy to realize the anxiety of his unspoken thoughts. Anything conceivably

possible might be happening to Julian—might, indeed, have already happened for all we knew to the contrary—and the essential wisdom of the detective's advice was obvious.

'Get me another piece of paper, Daphne,' I said, 'and I'll give Mr. Pittendrieck an introduction to Mrs. Scrimgeour, telling her that he has permission from me to search the house and asking her to give him every facility she can.' I dashed off a few lines to this effect, and handed the envelope containing them to him. 'Balbirny can take you round,' I went on, 'or, better still, Miss Blair. If it hadn't been for this confounded foot of mine, I'd have come round with you myself. Come back here when you've finished, and let us know how you've got on. While you're away, is there anything further I can do to help?'

'Nothing, I think,' said Pittendrieck, getting up from his chair. 'Except that you might try and call to mind any little idiosyncrasy or psychological trait in Scrimgeour's character which might assist us in our search. Often enough some childish trend or other shows itself strongly when the restraining powers of reason are in abeyance.'

He moved towards the door which Nigel had already opened for Daphne, and the young man caught him by the arm as he was passing through. 'Anything I can do Mr. Pittendrieck?' he asked eagerly, and added cheerfully that he was not hampered by a broken foot.

'Yes,' said the detective, pointedly enough. 'I wish you would reconsider your decision in the matter of my two questions. I don't wish to be unreasonably inquisitive and anything you may be able to tell me will be treated confidentially, but, can't you see that what may seem to you to have no actual bearing on your friend's disappearance may in reality—and when viewed from a professional standpoint—assume a totally different significance?'

He went out without waiting for an answer, and left Nigel staring after him. There could be no doubt but that his parting words had seriously disturbed that young man, who now quietly closed the door and walked across the room to the window. There he stood for a while, obviously watching Daphne and the detective making their way

next door. While I felt sorry that he should find himself in a dilemma, there was no denying the fact that there was both weight and justification in Pittendriech's appeal. I wondered whether he would care to confide in me; we had always been on terms of intimate friendship, and had often enough discussed all sorts of difficult problems with the utmost candour, though there was a fine and admirable reserve in his character which I had never failed to respect. I wavered for a few seconds as to what I should do, but finally decided that here was an opportunity to put our friendship to the test. After all, he could but refuse my offer, and there would be no harm done. So I began in the cowardly, roundabout way one does on these occasions.

'Aren't you going to finish your breakfast, old man?' I asked.

'By Jove, yes,' he said, swinging round and taking his old place at the table. 'I'd forgotten all about it. Not much point in starving, even if Julian has "done a bolt." I wonder what the deuce has happened to him? The whole business has me beat from start to finish.'

'Me, too,' I cordially agreed.

'The poor chap was in the most extraordinary state last night,' he went on. 'I don't know how he behaved at the dinner after the match and during the show after that, but, if he carried on in anything like the same idiotic way as he did with me, things must have been damnably uncomfortable all round. The amazing thing was that these bouts of lunacy alternated with periods of complete sanity. I never saw anything like it in my life.'

'Did he say anything about the match?'

'Never so much as mentioned it.'

'Or anything about going to London?'

'Not a word.'

'Well, then, what did he talk about—in his sane moments I mean?'

Nigel hesitated a second or two before answering this leading question. Then: 'Mostly about the pal I told you he went to see,' he said, rather unwillingly.

'Did you know, or had you ever heard about this pal before?'

'No.'

The word was so uncompromisingly spoken that I felt it would be unwise to pursue the subject much further. But I allowed myself one more question. 'Don't answer me if you'd rather not,' I said, 'but I should like to know if in your opinion this unknown pal was in any way connected with, or responsible for, any sort of trouble Julian had, or thought he had? Trouble, I mean, so serious that the poor fellow simply couldn't face the music?'

'There had been trouble, but it was all settled up during our visit. Honestly, Uncle Colin, I'm quite satisfied about that.'

'Good!' I said, 'I'm very glad to hear it. Won't you have some marmalade?'

'Thanks,' he laughed, and helped himself liberally. Then he looked at me with that sparkle of humour in his eyes that was so extraordinarily taking. 'You know,' he went on, 'thinking it over, I don't know that I need have made such a fuss about answering or, rather, not answering Pittendriech's first question. If he hadn't been in the room, I don't know that I should have had much objection, except in so far as my reply would have entailed making a more or less derogatory reflection on Julian—and that when he was in trouble and behind his back. And yet, as I see the thing now, the fact that he should have tried to pick a quarrel with me on the subject he chose—he didn't succeed, of course, because it does take two to make a quarrel—only serves to show me how utterly off his rocker he must have been.'

'Am I to hear any more?' I inquired quietly, when he had finished his speech and was busily employed buttering a piece of toast.

'Yes, if you like,' he replied, 'but I'm only telling you for the reason I've just mentioned. Put shortly, he came down on me like a ton of bricks and blethered an awful lot of tripe about my relations with Daphne. Accused me of having made her look ridiculous by my idiotic and impertinent public proposals, told me that, if it hadn't been for me, he'd have—er—won her love years ago, damned me to hell for having blasted his whole career,

and ended up by biffing me one on the head and swearing he'd be even with me yet. I've toned down his remarks a lot so that they don't perhaps sound as absurd as they did at the time they were spoken. Nor can I give you any really graphic idea of Julian's changed appearance ; all I know is that there was a sort of blazing hatred in his eyes. Which, seeing that we've always been the best of chums, struck me even at the time as being absolute bosh. What do you think, Uncle Colin ? '

What could I think ? On the face of it, Julian's outburst was utterly incomprehensible, and, as Nigel had clearly perceived, a most telling argument in favour of the man's insanity. For, as long as I could remember, the two had been sworn allies, and so far as Daphne was concerned, their rivalry—at least to all outward appearance—had been conducted on all that there could have been of the most blameless and one might even say the most sportsmanlike lines. Evidently, in Julian's case, a long existent but hitherto suppressed rancour against his rival had leapt to the surface as soon as his self restraint had given way. I could not bring myself to think that this rancour had been the actual cause of his madness. To mention one item only, Daphne, so far as I knew, had always distributed her favours equally as between her two suitors ; indeed, if pressed on the point, I should have said that there had been a slight bias in favour of Julian. Of course, Julian might have thought otherwise—obviously had thought otherwise—but I stuck to my opinion. I was dead sure there were other powerful factors at work if only we could find them. I thought that I could not do better than place my ideas before Nigel, and accordingly did so—in a modified way. I told him I agreed with him in thinking that Julian—temporarily, I hoped—was not responsible for either words or actions. I said, too, that his diatribes were as untrue as they were unfair, and could only be excused by reason of his irresponsibility.

' So far as you're concerned,' I finished up, ' you've nothing to reproach yourself with, and I'm glad to have had your confidence, I'll give you mine in return. I know as little as you do about the real state of Daphne's

affections, and I'm in no hurry to lose her, but, if the worst comes to the worst and I have to—well, I shan't be sorry to see you go in and win.'

His reception of a remark I had not found it easy to make was eminently characteristic of the man. 'She's a million times too good for me,' he asserted, his colour deepening a little as he spoke, 'but I can safely say I'll make her happy.' Then the inevitable twinkle of fun appeared in his eyes. 'And you may take it from me, Uncle Colin,' he grinned, 'that I will refrain from urging your welcome approval as an argument in favour of my suit. If I can't win Daphne by my own unaided efforts, I shall, however painful the experience may be, remain a bachelor.'

He got up and started to fill his pipe, while I confounded him for an impertinent puppy. Then, remembering the more immediate problem before us, I said I hoped he would have no objection to my handing the information, with which he had provided me, on to Pittendreich. I had just received his consent when, with a squeaking of brakes and an ominous grinding of gears, a motor pulled up, as I imagined, just in front of the house.

'Good Lord!' I exclaimed, 'who on earth is that?'

'Some blighter who has no respect for the essential innards of his car,' laughed Nigel, going to the window and looking out. 'Thinks they can be put right by a dose of Gregory's Powder, I suppose,' he chuckled. 'It's Doctor Brett, and he's coming in here.'

'Go and let him in, then—there's a good chap,' I said. 'He's a fellow I particularly wish to see.'

That he also particularly wished to see me was speedily proved by the way he bustled into the room and by the keen look of inquiry which he flashed in my direction. 'Morning, Colin,' he said, 'thought I might find you downstairs. I've just been up to my wards at the Royal Infirmary,—at which famous institution he was an Honorary Physician—' and I've had a disturbing conversation with Craigie, the international, you know, and one of our resident house-surgeons. I wasn't able to get to the match yesterday, after all, but I read an account of it in the evening paper. Reading between the lines I gathered

that Julian Scrimgeour had not distinguished himself much, but I had no idea he had gone all to bits until Craigie told me so this morning. Craigie says he had a devil of a time with him last night at dinner and afterwards at the Palais de Danse, and is of the opinion that the fellow has gone clean off his chump. As a matter of fact, Craigie waylaid me in the "duodenum,"—the name given by the denizens inhabiting the Infirmary to the passage which connects the medical with the surgical wards—to ask me how he was, and seemed considerably surprised to hear I hadn't been called in. He told me he had handed Julian over to Nigel Balbirny's care, so I thought my best plan was to run down in the car and come and see you before going next door. The fact is I'm in a bit of an awkward predicament, and——'

'So are we,' I interrupted, and forthwith told him all that the reader already knows.

He heard the story with less surprise than I had expected him to show, and I at once seized the opportunity of asking him what his frown had meant when he and Daphne had been discussing Julian together the day before!

'It meant this,' he replied, '—and now that Julian has disappeared it is as well that you should know it—it meant that he came to consult me last Monday as to whether or not he should take part in the match. It meant that, after overhauling him pretty thoroughly, I strongly advised him not to play. In fact, I went further: I peremptorily ordered him not to play. And jolly well snubbed I was for my pains. For what does my fine fellow do but ignore my advice and announce his intention of going off forthwith to consult another and, I give you my word for it, a distinctly inferior practitioner. And by Gad! that's just what he did! He went off and consulted Doctor Barnaby Fagan—a leech of the baser sort—said he'd been strongly recommended to do so by that—that holy humbug, the Reverend Father Sadde!'

Nigel and I both laughed out aloud at this half-serious, half-bantering, but wholly vehement tirade. 'Putting aside all rotten professional jealousies,' I gibed, 'who is Doctor Barnaby Fagan, and why do you run him down? Isn't his name on the Medical Register?'

'Oh! it's there right enough,' he retorted, scowling heavily. 'That fact doesn't stand for much; it simply means that he had sufficient brains to pass his professional examinations. He's still got the brains—or, rather, the low cunning that frequently passes for the same—and he makes quite a comfortable living out of the follies of his fellow men. Like the rest of us,' he chuckled fiercely. 'But, seriously, what worries me is the knowledge that a man of Julian's type should have sought advice from such an outsider. I'm open to wager something handsome that the number of patient's of Julian's reputation and standing included in Barnaby Fagan's *clientèle* may easily be counted on the fingers of one hand.'

This was unpleasant news to hear, for it seemed to me to hint at some subtle deterioration in Julian's character. And it was equally surprising and distressing to me because, though I personally had not seen the man for about a fortnight, I had noticed nothing out of the ordinary in him when he had dined with us the night before my accident.

"If your professional etiquette permits," I resumed, can you tell us—in simple language, what was wrong with the man?"

Hubert Brett smiled grimly. 'There are occasions,' said he, 'when professional etiquette is better out of the way, and this is one of them. I rather think it will only be fair to Christie Pittendriech—I'm glad you've called him in, by the way, because he's a man devoid of all sickly sentimentalities, and capable of doing magnificent work—to let him know that Julian in my opinion had reached what is commonly known as the end of his tether. Objectively, I found in him every possible sign of acute emotional disturbance, though subjectively, his symptoms would hardly have been so obvious to the untrained and unobservant lay mind. By which I mean that the man was making the most heroic efforts to hold himself in; a proceeding, which, though foolish enough from a medical point of view, was nevertheless greatly to his credit. He was literally "on edge," and I felt that at any moment he might break down and scream like a neurotic girl. I wish he had broken down and screamed; it would have done him a deuce of a lot of good. But he held on in the

most gallant, in most unfortunate way, with the inevitable result that, when the crash did come, it was an infinitely more disastrous crash than ever it need have been.'

'I suppose you tried to discover some cause for the condition?'

'Not being exactly a congenital idiot, of course I did,' came the irritable retort. 'Without any success, though, for he wouldn't say a word except to suggest that he might have been working too hard. As if hard work ever did anybody a ha'porth of harm! No, he seemed to think that, if I'd prescribe a sedative to give him a bit more sleep, he'd soon be quite fit. He might as well have expected me to cure a case of cancer by sticking a bit of Mead's Plaster over it! But'—he paused, and wagged a denunciatory forefinger at us—'I shrewdly suspect that friend Fagan had no scruples about handing out the dope!'

'I take you to mean that such treatment would be quite unjustifiable,' I said.

He nodded. 'Yes, especially if given in any large quantity. Its main effect would be to precipitate the crisis and accentuate the disaster when it did arrive. For the simple reason that the narcotic would have weakened the fellow's powers of resistance against any great strain. Well, you had all the strain you could possibly want in yesterday's match, and we know that Julian's powers of resistance were already stretched to breaking point.'

'Will you stay and explain all this to Pittendreich?'

'I can't very well do that, I haven't the time. You can easily tell him yourself. I suppose I ought to go in and see Mrs. Scrimgeour, but Lord! I haven't the patience to cope with neurosis in any shape or form. Anyhow, she'll be happier under the fostering care of her father-confessor. This isn't a professional visit, Colin,' he hastily changed the subject, 'but how 's the foot going on?'

'It's mending so infernally slowly,' I retorted, 'that I'm thinking of changing my medical man. I might do worse than call in Dr. Fagan, eh?'

'You might,' he chortled, and hurried out of the room escorted by Nigel as far as his car.

By the time the latter returned, I had made up my mind to keep him with us if I could for the rest of the day,

and so asked him at once if he could manage to stay. 'I'm getting a bit fed up with this business of Julian's,' I remarked on receiving his joyful assent. 'Any way, we can't do anything more till Pittendriech comes back, so what about a game of piquet?'

CHAPTER V

WE played till noon, when the peaceful atmosphere of the room was effectively disturbed by the entrance of Daphne, who held up her hands in mock horror at sight of our depravity. 'Stands Scotland where it did?' she asked severely, seating herself on a low stool near the fire. 'All the same, Dad, I advise you to make the most of your present opportunity,' she went on, 'because I've asked Effie to come and stay with us.'

She has a light hearted habit of exploding bombshells of this description about my devoted head, but this time she succeeded in going a bit too far. 'No, hang it all! Daphne,' I protested, 'there's a limit to my powers of endurance. Had I been able to go to the office in the usual way, I daresay I might have put up with your guest, but it's cruelty to animals in my defenceless condition, and I won't have it.'

Nigel's objection was shorter and just as much to the point. 'Oh, my sainted aunt!' said he.

'I don't mind your letting off steam as long as you do it before she comes,' was my daughter's graceless rejoinder to our united protestations. 'Everything has been arranged, so it's no use making a fuss. If the prospect doesn't exactly fill you with delight, what about me? D'you suppose I'm looking forward to my part in the *lamasha*?'

'No, I don't suppose you are. But, dash it all! you've only got yourself to blame. Why on earth did you ask her?'

'Have a heart, Daphne,' Nigel put in, boldly backing me up.

Our efforts were of no avail. Ignoring Nigel's appeal altogether, Daphne addressed herself to me. 'You'd have asked her yourself if you'd seen the state she was in,' she asserted in tones of the utmost conviction. 'She was distracted enough when I saw her early this morning, but now—what with the ordeal she had just gone through at Pittendriech's hands, and her horror at having missed what she calls Early Mass, she's more like a whimpering cur which has been unmercifully beaten than anything else I can think of. I've just persuaded her to lie down on her bed, and she won't be coming here till the evening.'

After hearing this explanation, I think we were both a little ashamed of ourselves. Any way, I felt I could no longer maintain my opposition, while Nigel showed his change of opinion by murmuring indistinctly something about Daphne's being a good sort.

'No, I'm not that, my lad,' she explained quite frankly, when she caught his words. 'Mine was a choice between two evils, and I only chose the lesser of the two. If Effie hadn't come here, I should have had to go next door. She said she couldn't stay another night in the house by herself, and she's one of those unfortunate people without a real friend of her own. Her own fault, of course, but—well—there you are!'

There we were, indeed, and there was nothing to be done but accept the situation as cheerfully as we could. I asked Daphne what had become of Pittendriech.

'He's doing a little telephoning from Effie's, but said he'd be round almost immediately.'

Then she got up from her stool—a perfect picture of modern girlhood, wholesome of mind, healthy of body, practical, self-dependent, yet neither devoid of sentiment nor scornful of her sex—said she had a hundred household duties to perform, beckoned to Nigel to go with her, and led the way out of the room. In what fashion he was to be of assistance to her I failed to comprehend, but I fancied her idea was to give me an opportunity for a heart-to-heart talk with the detective when he returned.

He was not long in coming, and plunged at once, if not

exactly *in medias res*, at least into a mightily-interesting disquisition on the subject of his work. 'Mr. Blair,' he said gravely, 'it's a commonplace remark for a man in my profession to say at the outset of each new case he is called upon to tackle that he's seldom been up against anything that has puzzled him more. As you know, I've had a pretty lengthy experience of crime and the detection of crime—fifteen years as a member of the regular force and nearly eleven on my own account—and from first to last I've undertaken, or helped to undertake, more than four thousand investigations. Most of these—the vast majority of them in fact—called for no particular effort of brain; the problems they represented could have been solved by anybody possessed of ordinary intelligence and common sense. Some others were—and could only have been—carried to a successful conclusion by men intensively trained in habits of exact and rapid observation and possessed at the same time of a sound knowledge not only of the psychology of the criminal mind but of the actual history of crime in all its varied aspects. But a few, and these by no means the most complex and abstruse, were puzzles which remained unsolved. For this reason, I believe: that the brains of the detective or detectives employed were deficient in intelligence, in imagination, and in cunning, when compared with those of the criminal himself. Such a man is the so-called super-criminal so beloved by the readers of sensational fiction, but he indubitably exists in real life. I have myself made the acquaintance of three, if not four, heroes of this description, the responsibility for whose crimes could by no shadow of possibility have been brought home to them. I hope I'm not boring you with all this; I have my reasons for placing my views before you, and I'm just coming to them.'

'Well,' I remarked, as he brought his lecture to a close, 'I can at least guess that you've already made up your mind that the case of Julian Scrimgeour is not likely to be placed in the category you first alluded to.'

'More than that, Mr. Blair,' he corrected, with a twisted sort of smile on his face, 'a good deal more than that. Without boasting—for I take no credit to myself for what I may describe as an inborn *flair* for the detection of crime—

I may justly claim, I think, that all my successes have been due to what for want of a better name I may describe as that quality or gift of intuition—call it what you will—with which I have fortunately been endowed. It's a gift that you can't analyse, because you can assign no reason for its existence. Women possess it in far greater proportion than do men, as far as my experience goes, and the faculty has often enough stood them in right good stead. But men have it, too; in particular, I remember a notably good bridge-player who used openly to state that he owed his considerable winnings at that game solely to his intuitive powers. And I once met a doctor who frankly confessed that his skill in diagnosis was entirely due to a similar cause. Well, I can say the same with regard to my work; almost as soon as I've come in contact with any new problem, unlikely as it must sound to you, I have been able to sense my way into it and through it in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred.'

'A pretty useful gift, Pittendrieck, eh?'

'Very useful indeed,' he agreed, 'except for the hundredth case.'

There was no mistaking his meaning, and I looked at him in some astonishment. 'Are you actually suggesting already that, so far as you're concerned, the mystery surrounding Julian Scrimgeour is likely to remain unsolved?' I asked. 'Surely it's early in the day to take a view like that?'

'Well, I wish to be quite honest with you, Mr. Blair, and I consider myself bound to tell you that, so far as I have gone in the matter, my gift of intuition has failed me to an unusual degree. Naturally, as you will understand, it's a faculty which acts independently of any volition whatsoever on my part. Could I control it, I should inevitably have become the greatest detective of this or any other age. Don't think I'm bragging; no credit, as I've said before, would be due to me. No, I simply wish to confess to you that at this moment I am so completely baffled by the mystery in front of me that I can't even guess—much less state with any certainty—whether Scrimgeour is the victim or the perpetrator of what may well turn out to be a peculiarly diabolical crime.'

On hearing this I sat up in my chair with so sudden a movement that I felt a devil of a twinge of pain in my damaged foot. 'Damn it, man!' I exclaimed, venting my irritation on him, 'intuition or no intuition, you seem to have no hesitation whatever in stating that you're up against a case of crime—diabolical crime was the expression you used. You must have made some progress in the case to have got even as far as that. I can see no further myself than that the unfortunate fellow must suddenly have gone clean out of his mind.'

Pittendriech regarded me through half-closed eyelids for a second or two. 'I'm afraid I've expressed myself rather unfortunately, Mr. Blair,' he said, drily enough. 'Maybe it was because I was annoyed at myself for not making quicker progress than I have; maybe it was because I felt that whatever progress I might ultimately make would inevitably bring pain to innocent folk; maybe it was because I knew that the suspicions already roused in my mind were largely the result of pure speculation, and that's a method of procedure for which I haven't the slightest use. I don't want you to think that I haven't made some progress, because that would not be true. I merely wish you to understand that I'm profoundly dissatisfied with the progress I have made. And I was wondering whether, under the circumstances, it might not be the straight thing for me to advise you to call in some other expert.'

I must say I was rather struck with this unusual *apologia*, and felt that, behind his grim and forbidding exterior, the man must be possessed of some rudiments of humility, certain lofty ideals, and more kindness of heart than he was ordinarily credited with. 'You're being uncommonly candid with me, Pittendriech,' I said, 'and that I fully appreciate. It's a comfort to deal with a fellow who occasionally has the courage to say he doesn't know. I take it you don't wish to give up the case, do you?'

'Not in the least, so long as you're satisfied. But I warn you it's a problem which will not be solved in a hurry and which, moreover, may involve you in heavy costs.'

'Well, we can't help that,' I replied. 'Until I've communicated with my co-trustee, however, I can't very well authorize any excessive expenditure, but you may

rest assured that all reasonable charges will be met. Now, let me hear about your doings next door. Oh, by the way, will you have a drink ?'

He declined my offer with thanks, saying that he seldom, if ever, took alcohol in any shape or form. His refusal, somehow or other, did not surprise me, though I don't know that it made me think any the better of him. Your abstainer is, as a general rule, a dull dog with an itch for interfering—often finically enough, it's true—with affairs which have nothing whatever to do with him. It's the method, I suppose, by which he unconsciously seeks to cover his innate fear of life. To use Robert Louis Stevenson's telling phrase, there's no 'living dangerously' for him. Not, I reflected, that Pittendriech had not lived dangerously, but, doubtless, he was the exception that proved the rule. He did, however, accept a cigarette, though this again, was a gesture which did not impress me. I had rather he had smoked a pipe. Having lit it, he settled down to tell his tale.

'I may say, Mr. Blair,' he began, 'that I went next door with two distinct and important objects in view. The first was to ferret out all I could about the supposed burglary; the second was to get such information concerning Scrimgeour's character and general habits as I might reasonably expect to do from his mother. As regards the burglary, I very soon discovered three significant facts. First, that the burglar—let us for the moment and for convenience's sake call him by that name—entered, and left the house by the front door. Second, that, with the exception of a couple of rings and a little loose cash which was lying on Mrs. Scrimgeour's dressing-table, he removed nothing of solid or intrinsic value, though he might quite easily have done so. Third, that he confined his depredations almost entirely to Scrimgeour's own two rooms—a study and a bedroom. Every single drawer in both of these rooms had been completely ransacked, and their contents scattered all over the place. In particular, the desk—or, rather, the bureau—in the study, in which I am told he kept his private papers, had been systematically and mercilessly raided. Three of the drawers in it, which it was Scrimgeour's habit to keep locked, had been wrenched open by means of a

chisel or some such tool, and cleared of everything that had been in them. Whether the burglar carried off any portion of the contents of these drawers I can't say, though it's likely enough he did. But that the greater part had been ruthlessly destroyed was obvious from the considerable heap of incinerated paper I found in the hearth.'

'But, good heavens!' I exclaimed, 'you don't mean to tell me that all this happened without any one of the members of the household being disturbed?'

'Apparently so,' he replied, with a suggestive shrug of his shoulders which seemed to imply that he had his doubts about the veracity of these people. 'All the same,' he went on, 'it is a possibility. Scrimgeour's two rooms, as you may know, are on the third floor, and face the street. His mother's bedroom is on the first floor behind the drawing-room and faces the backs of the houses in Bonaly Terrace, while the servants sleep in the annexe which juts out into the back garden, just as, I suppose, your own servants do.'

'But, granted all this,' I objected, 'you can't wrench drawers open with a chisel without making a thundering row.'

'You could have done it in this case,' he answered imperturbably. 'I examined the bureau with meticulous care, and found the wood in a very rotten state.'

'Well, what about the smell of burning?' I persisted.

'The chances of that being detected, always provided that Mrs. Scrimgeour slept soundly through the night, were infinitesimal,' he replied.

'But I've always understood that she's a notoriously bad sleeper,' I continued to protest.

He looked at me with his somewhat cynical smile. 'I imagine she has always taken good care to tell you so,' he chuckled. 'I have only just had the pleasure of making the lady's acquaintance,' he went on, 'but from what little I've seen of her I should say that she is the type of woman who could habitually deceive herself into thinking that, for instance, black was white with a far greater ease than that with which most of the rest of us could accomplish a similar feat. I suppose I hadn't more than half an hour's conversation with her altogether, but during

that brief time I spotted her telling lies, doubtless quite unconsciously to herself—on no less than four occasions. There may have been more—I don't know—but I heard enough to satisfy myself that precious little credence could be given to any evidence of hers. It is to be hoped that fate will never be so unkind as to land her in the witness box; she would be pounded into mincemeat at the hands of an able advocate—especially if he had a trace of cruelty in his general disposition.'

I nodded my agreement with his diagnosis of the woman's character. It seemed to me that he had sized her up with a just and scientific accuracy which could not be gainsaid. 'You think she sleeps better than she's ever likely to admit?' I laughed.

'I'm certain of it,' he returned, with an assurance in his voice which was very convincing. 'Which, incidentally,' he added, 'makes me wonder whether I can possibly believe a statement she made to me this morning to the effect that she had been dimly conscious of her son's presence in her room some time in the middle of the night. She says that she had a vague impression of him standing near her bed and speaking a few words to her, though she has no recollection of what the words may actually have been.'

'It's quite possible he was there,' I said. 'I happen to know that, though Julian is well aware of his mother's little failings, he has always retained an honest feeling of filial affection for her, and as a rule—and I believe I'm right in saying this—was in the habit of going into her room and saying "good night" to her, no matter how late he may have come home.'

'I'm interested to hear you say that, Mr. Blair,' said Pittendriech. 'The fact that it was his usual custom to visit his mother's room makes her remark more credible; though, of course, she's not a clear thinker, and may have confused the impression she got last night with the memory of any one of his innumerable other visits. But it would certainly seem to corroborate Mr. Balbirny's statement that he saw Scrimgeour actually enter the house next door last night.'

I pricked up my ears at this. 'What d'you mean?' I asked. 'D'you think he can possibly have been mistaken?'

'I don't know what to think, Mr. Blair,' he answered, slowly and impressively, 'and that's a fact. If I could allow myself the luxury of pandering to my own personal feelings in this matter—for I willingly admit to you that I have a liking and an admiration for Julian Scrimgeour—I could almost find it in my heart to wish he had. For I'm inclined to think that whoever it was that young Balbirny saw going into that house last night must have been the actual criminal.'

'Good God, man!' I exclaimed, 'd'you know what you're saying? Julian Scrimgeour a criminal, robbing his own mother and smashing up his own desk—when he'd only to use a key! The very idea is utterly preposterous!'

'If you'd had my experience,' Pittendriech broke in soothingly, 'you'd know that in this amazing world of ours nothing—no conceivable idea, I mean—is utterly preposterous. But I did not say definitely that Scrimgeour was a criminal; all I said was that I thought that the man seen by Balbirny to enter the Scrimgeour house last night must have been the individual who ransacked the place.'

'I simply don't follow you,' I grunted irritably enough, for I was beginning to feel more than a little rattled at finding myself involved in all this mystery. 'You'll have to be a bit more explicit.'

'Well, Mr. Blair,' he said, 'from my own observations and from the stories I had from Mrs. Scrimgeour and the cook—an elderly, dependable creature of the name of Martha Scott, who has been with the family for more than twenty years—I am certain that the intruder, whoever he was, obtained access to the house through the front door. Let himself in, in fact, by using a latchkey in the usual way. This he could have done quite easily, since Mrs. Scrimgeour informed me that she had herself left the door unsnibbed for her son's convenience when she went to bed at eleven-thirty. An hour before that she had taken leave of her minister—he pulled up here, grinned, and corrected himself—her priest, I ought to say, and had shaken hands with him on the top of the steps. She had, she told me, inadvertently snibbed the door when she closed it after him, but had remembered to remedy her mistake later on. The cook positively assured me that, in accordance with

her regular custom, she had seen to it that all the basement and ground-floor windows had been securely fastened, and the back door bolted and locked shortly after ten o'clock. She added that they were still in the same condition when she got up this morning. I examined the windows myself both inside and out, and found not so much as a scratch on the new paint. Similarly, there was not a mark on the back door, and no fresh footprints outside.'

I listened to these details with the utmost interest. 'All you say would appear to point towards the conclusion you have reached. At least it would seem that, if Julian is not the culprit—and really, but for his sudden attack of insanity, I can't believe he can have played such a part—the culprit must necessarily be somebody intimately acquainted not only with the inside of the house next door but also with the actual situation obtaining in that house last night. In other words, the culprit must have known that the lock was left unsnibbed, and must somehow or other have succeeded in getting possession of a key.'

'Exactly,' Pittendriech agreed. 'Well, there are three keys known to be in existence. Scrimgeour had one, his mother the second, and Martha Scott, a privileged retainer, the third. The two mentioned last I have seen this morning, but the other has disappeared, presumably with Scrimgeour himself. Now, on your reasoning as well as on my own, either Scrimgeour himself used that key last night or else he handed it over to somebody who, acting on his instructions, destroyed all his private papers, and, as a "blind," abstracted the two rings and the cash.'

'As a "blind"?' I echoed, in some surprise.

'Yes, I imagine so,' he said. 'It was done for the purpose of supplying something in the nature of a motive for the burglary. A clumsy expedient, savouring of the amateur, of course, and one which very likely the burglar may live to rue, unless he threw the rings down the nearest grid. Well, now, let us suppose that Scrimgeour carried out the stunt himself. At the moment we are in the dark as to his reasons for desiring to rid himself of his papers, but, granted he did indeed commit the burglary, it is a fact that he was in a far better position to do so than any confederate could possibly have been. Especially as

regards the purloining of the rings from his mother's room. That, after carrying the whole business successfully through, he made the fatal mistake of disappearing from the light of day himself may probably be best explained by the state of mental aberration in which we suspect him to have been. Do you agree, Mr Blair ?

'Yes,' I was forced to admit, somewhat unwillingly. 'I'm afraid it's a supposition we shall be compelled to keep before our eyes.'

'But only a supposition, remember,' said Pittendriech, as a sop, I suppose, to my reluctant assent. 'Now, on the other hand, he went on, let us suppose that the burglary was carried out by a confederate. In this case, the only comment I feel called upon to make is that the deputy employed must have been someone who could be trusted to make his way about the house without any difficulty, and who could be depended upon to keep his mouth shut tight—after the exploit had been achieved. If this argument of mine is sound, then the person in question would likely be a pretty close personal friend of Scrimgeour's.'

'Yes,' I broke in, 'but hold on a moment. Would it not have been possible for Julian to have availed himself of the help of a professional crook ? I admit that a few hours ago I should not have suspected that he was acquainted with any of the fraternity, but, since you and he seem to have been hobnobbing together over your projected book, and since you must know a good many of the unsavoury crowd, it has just struck me that you might have introduced one or two specimens to him and that he might in an unguarded moment have given his instructions and handed over his key to one of them. An insane thing to do, no doubt, but I can only surmise that he must have been—and is—out of his mind.'

Pittendriech thought carefully before replying. 'There's something in the notion, Mr. Blair,' he confessed. 'He had got to know some of the Edinburgh crooks, I believe, though I certainly gave him no introductions. I know that people sometimes talk as if detectives and crooks are on—I was almost going to say—visiting terms with each other, but that has not been my experience. Perhaps I have been too much of a thorn in the flesh for them to have

any kindly feelings for me. I've been threatened times without number, and my life attempted on at least five occasions. But they haven't got me yet; they know I don't stand much nonsense, and never go about unarmed.' He gave a grim little smile, and with lightning rapidity, as it seemed to me, produced the butt end of a formidable revolver out of his hip pocket.

'Then you don't think much of my idea?' I asked, as he slid the weapon back and proceeded to light a second cigarette.

'There may be something in it,' he admitted, 'though, candidly, I don't think much. We'll add it to the list of suppositions, though I must say I prefer my own. Has Scrimgeour any near relatives?'

'Only his mother, and I hardly think you can suspect her,' I replied, laughing at the absurd idea.

'Just now I suspect everyone—even her,' he retorted, frowning as he spoke. 'What about his more intimate friends?'

I laughed again. 'He's hail-fellow-well-met with scores of good fellows,' I said, 'especially among the sporting and athletic lot. I don't know, but I should say that Nigel Balbirny ranks easily first among his sworn allies.'

'Just so,' said Pittendriech, in his dry, direct way. 'Well, as matters stand,' he went on slowly, emphasizing every syllable he spoke, 'I am doing Mr. Balbirny the justice—or the injustice—of suspecting him more than anybody else.'

CHAPTER VI

THIS time I fairly bounced out of my chair with indignation and astonishment, and thereby only succeeded in hurting my crippled foot more infernally than ever. 'The devil you are!' I roared, furious as much with the fellow for what I chose to consider his impertinent and damnable suspicion as I was at the

really severe twinge of pain I felt. 'The devil you are!' I repeated, a little less vigorously, as the humour of the situation came home to me. 'Why man,' I snorted, 'you'll be suspecting an old lamiter like myself in another minute!'

'It's only that game leg of yours that has saved you, Mr. Blair,' he agreed, while that twisted smile of his came once more into play. 'You will, however, do me the kindness to remember that I said I might have to bring a certain amount of distress to innocent folk,' he went on, speaking quickly, and as if he wished to catch up with and allay my ill-humour. 'Will you try and look calmly at the facts regarding Mr. Balbirny as they arrange themselves—as the French say—before unbiassed eyes?'

I nodded sharply; at the moment I didn't quite trust myself to speak.

'Well,' said Pittendrieck, 'on your own showing, Balbirny is Scrimgeour's greatest and most intimate friend. And as such, is probably as much at home next door as I see he is here.'

'He knows every nook and corner of both houses,' I snapped.

'I thought as much,' came the calm reply. 'Now, further, we know that Doctor Craigie handed over Scrimgeour to Balbirny's care at the Palais de Danse last night at eleven o'clock. We are also told that during the two hours they were together they paid a visit to an unknown somebody at an unknown flat—of which visit Balbirny flatly declines to give any account whatsoever—and that they had a violent quarrel at one a.m. which led to their parting company altogether. At least, that was how Balbirny put it the first time he told the tale, and, moreover, you can hardly fail to recollect how extremely unwilling he was to enlighten our ignorance on the subject of the aforesaid quarrel.'

He paused here, evidently expecting me to reply. I felt I was already in a position to tell him a thing or two, but thought it best to hear all he had to say before I let him have it. So I contented myself with uttering the three words—'Please go on.'

He went on, without the slightest hesitation. 'The

second time he gave rather a different account of what happened after the quarrel. He said that he followed Scrimgeour home here, saw him go into the house, and hung about outside till nearly three o'clock.'

'Well?' I asked, as he came to a full stop once again.

'Well,' he echoed, with a rasping laugh. 'Oh, I'm making every allowance for your feelings, Mr. Blair, for I'm quite aware that you're probably wrestling with the desire to kick me out of the room, if only your foot was in working order. But (believe me or not as you like), I'm only trying to put the case before you from every possible aspect; and that, if you wish me to go on with it, I mean to continue to do. So, asking your pardon if my answer to your "Well?" should chance to offend you, I shall simply answer that we have only Balbirny's word——'

'And I should believe him even if the Pope and the whole College of Cardinals were to testify against it!' I retorted hotly, and yet with a sort of doubt beginning to dawn in my mind as to whether I wasn't making rather an ass of myself by my vehement partisanship. After all, I reflected, as I began to calm down, Pittendriech did not know Nigel as I knew the lad and was only acting up to his lights, such as they were. Also I admired the way in which he stood his ground like a man, and refused to be brow-beaten by anyone.

'Look here, Mr. Pittendriech,' I said, apologetically, 'you must forget my resentment, and put it down to the liking I have for Balbirny. I tell you he is of the salt of the earth, and is utterly incapable of chicanery of any sort or kind.'

The detective smiled a little cynically, as much as to say that this sort of eulogy was nothing but pure bunkum. He had the discretion, however, not to voice his opinion aloud, and in fact immediately adopted a more conciliatory tone.

'He evidently has a stout friend in you, Mr. Blair,' he said, 'and maybe your opinion of him is right, though I have known as good fellows as you believe him to be do mighty queer, not to say shady, things from a hundred different motives. In a way, your very praise of the man is an argument in favour of my suspicion. Suppose, for

instance, that Scrimgeour has got himself into some sort of a desperate corner and has appealed to his friend to get him out of it. Suppose, too, that Balbirny has pledged his word that he will never divulge a secret—discreditable or not to the man who has entrusted him with it—what, I ask you, is Balbirny's line of conduct likely to be? Would he not stick to his chum through thick and thin? For all I know of him, he may—apart from any simple question of loyalty—be under an obligation of another kind to his friend.'

I didn't cotton much to Pittendriech, but there was no getting over the striking acumen of his mind. 'You're right,' I conceded, 'all the way along. I veritably believe that no power on earth would compel Balbirny to betray his friend's confidence, especially when, as in this case, he owes his very existence to that friend's gallantry.'

'What d'you mean, Mr. Blair?'

'I mean that Scrimgeour rescued Balbirny from drowning—ten or twelve years ago.'

'Well, there you are,' cried Pittendriech. 'Your statement goes a long way in support of my contention.'

'Maybe it does,' I admitted, 'so far as any action of his in sheltering Scrimgeour is concerned. But I have still to be convinced that even for that purpose he would condescend to lie. What I am trying to bring out is the certainty I feel in my own mind that Balbirny's defence of Scrimgeour would not go further than a blank refusal to betray his friend's confidence in any sort of way.'

Pittendriech received this speech with a non-committal grunt, but made no other comment. Judging the present moment to be opportune, I therefore proceeded to inform him of Hubert Brett's account of Julian's state of health and the sudden changing of his medical adviser, as well as of Nigel's own explanation of the quarrel with Scrimgeour and of the visit to Scrimgeour's unknown pal. He listened attentively and silently to all I had to say, but, immediately I had finished, turned on me with a remark which was as unpleasant as it was unexpected. Though looking back now, as I write these words, I don't think I can truthfully maintain that it was altogether unjustifiable into the bargain.

'Mr. Blair,' he said, in rather aggrieved tones, 'it can hardly have escaped your notice that our association has not so far been distinguished by that cordiality and candour which I have no hesitation in pointing out to you is essential for the success of any investigation in which I have the honour to be employed. I'm quite well aware (I've been told often enough) that my manner is against me, and I'm prepared to believe it. But I would say in extenuation of an unfortunate failing that it is matter that counts and not manner. Without any undue pride, I may assume that you would not have consulted me in this case, had you not been satisfied that the root of the matter—some ability for detective work—lay in me. If that is so, why, then, bother about manner? So much for my side of the question. Now for yours. It seems to me (if I'm wrong, I'll willingly apologize) that you are not treating me quite fairly and that there is a tendency on your part—I won't say to prevent me getting to the bottom of this wretched business—but to make my task in endeavouring to do so more difficult than it needs should be. You may be unconscious of this, but it's there all the same. Now, if I'm to meet with any success at all in unravelling the problem, I must have more of your confidence—otherwise, I don't see how I'm to do any good.'

I laughed (a little uncomfortably, perhaps) at this complaint. 'It's true enough that your manner puts my back up at times,' I said, 'but to a certain extent you'll have to share the blame for that. As regards your other count, it would be as well if you'd be a trifle more explicit.' I thought I knew what he was getting at, but I saw no reason to anticipate his criticism whatever it might be.

'Well, from the start,' he explained, 'I could only have described your attitude to me as being one of a veiled antagonism—due, partly, no doubt, to the effect of my general demeanour on you, and partly to the feeling of annoyance you experienced at having been entangled in a case with me at all. For all that I was prepared to make every allowance; it has happened often enough before. But gradually an impression grew upon me that you were not giving me your whole trust; that you were, in fact, leaving me to guess at details about which you

could easily have put me wise. I can give you chapter and verse for the sort of thing I mean. You may remember that, when I discovered that Scrimgeour had told Miss Blair about the book which he and I were writing, I asked you, or as good as asked you, whether they were lovers. Well, you replied with considerable emphasis that they were nothing more than very old and very tried friends. It was, therefore, a bit of a shock to me to hear from you a minute ago that the quarrel between the two men concerned your daughter—more especially so as, during my recent talk with Mrs. Scrimgeour, she had also given me very plainly to understand that her son was deeply in love with, and practically engaged to, Miss Blair. You'll remember, too, that I told you I had detected Mrs. Scrimgeour telling me lies. Well, this, as I very naturally thought, was one of the biggest she told. You must see, then, that if this sort of thing is to go on, we won't reach our goal with any speed.'

I listened patiently to what he said, and felt bound to admit the comparative justice of his words. 'You're not being quite fair to me,' I said in reply. 'I certainly knew that both men were in love with my daughter, but I also knew that she had not accepted a proposal from either of them. In Scrimgeour's case, I do not know even now whether he has ever made one. So there was some justification for the answer I gave. Come now, Mr. Pittendriech,' I went on more cordially. 'I will make amends for my reserve. I think I answered as I did because in my heart of hearts I knew I should greatly prefer Balbirny to Scrimgeour as a future son-in-law. I feel sure that this feeling, all unconsciously to myself, influenced my reply. But, naturally, I can see that a knowledge of the rivalry between the two men is likely to affect your handling of the case.'

'Thank you, Mr. Blair,' said Pittendriech. 'I hoped you would see my point. Now we can go ahead. May I ask, without offence, which of the two Miss Blair prefers?'

'I can answer that question straight off,' I laughed. 'She hasn't as yet made up her mind.'

'Well,' he returned, 'she'll likely be helped to do so before this case comes to an end, if it goes as I begin to

fear it will. Have you any objection to telling me why you prefer Balbirny to Scrimgeour ?'

'Only because in my opinion he'll make Miss Blair a finer husband. He has nothing of Scrimgeour's versatility and brilliance, but he has "wecht," as Dr. Chalmers used to say—commonsense, and a sound conception of the meaning of life—not to mention a sense of humour, and a great capacity for work. He's a bit flippant on the outside, but that's a matter of no importance.'

'A far less complex character than Scrimgeour ?'

'So I should judge. I should call Scrimgeour "deep." Don't mistake me when I use that word. I like and admire Julian in many ways, and I daresay I'm on as easy terms with him as is any man of an older generation. But he's not as open-minded or as generous-hearted as Balbirny is ; you feel, or, at least, I do, that you can't get at the real man. I don't like to say he's more selfish than the rest of us, but he gives me the impression (and this in spite of his prowess at sport) that he's always taking good care of himself. I think this trait might have been knocked out of him, had his father lived. As it is, he's been brought up the only son of his mother, and she's—well, between ourselves, Pittendriech—she's an utterly impossible woman.'

'So I imagined. Making every allowance for her present distress, I found her, as you say, impossible. I've had some difficulty in pumping you and Mr. Balbirny' (he gave his harsh laugh), 'but an oyster wasn't in it with her. She talked—oh ! she talked as if she were wound up and couldn't stop, but she never said anything. Wouldn't stick to the point, but hovered all over the place—chiefly about the virtues of her son. She has already persuaded herself that he is dead. But she also referred a good deal to the excessive kindness of the Reverend Father Sadde.'

'Yes, she would do that. By the way, do you know anything about him ?'

'Er-mm—ye-es, a little. Quite enough to feel sure he's not exactly what he appears to be. I'm going to keep my eye on him, and I shall be obliged if you'll be good enough to do the same. He'll likely enough be coming to condole with one of his flock, and I understand you're

putting Mrs. Scrimgeour up here. There's something going on between these two, though as yet I haven't an inkling of what it is.'

'Lord help us!' I exclaimed fervently, 'another complication! As I told my daughter, I shouldn't have minded Mrs. Scrimgeour so much if I hadn't been tied to the house. But I hadn't bargained for the padre as well.'

'You'll be the better able to watch his little game, whatever it may be.'

'Right. I'll do my best, though the prospect is anything but inviting, to put it as mildly as I can. By the way, I've forgotten to ask you about Dr. Barnaby Fagan. Have you ever come across him?'

'Oh, yes. He's a fellow who sails just about as close to the wind as he dares. I'll make a point of seeing him sometime to-day, and' (he regarded me with a knowing air) 'I don't think he's in a position to refuse me any information I may require. Now,' (he glanced at his watch). 'I must be getting along. But, before I go, Mr. Blair, I should like to tell you what immediate steps I propose to take—subject to your approval, of course.'

'Won't you stay to our midday meal? It'll be ready in half an hour.'

'I haven't the time; thanks all the same,' he said, getting up and standing in front of the fire, on to which he was kind enough to put some coals. 'The main thing,' he went on, turning and facing in my direction, 'is to lay hands on Scrimgeour as soon as ever we can. The trouble is that he's had a possible six or seven hours' start, and that we don't know whether he's still in Edinburgh or not. The only thing I am certain about is that he is not using his own car, because it's still in the garage. Now, though I know I ought to have asked your permission first, I took the liberty of ringing up the police authorities about ten o'clock and asking them to have all the main railway termini and the principal ports carefully watched. Fortunately for our purpose, this is a Sunday, and there's practically no traffic on the railway lines; fortunately, too, Scrimgeour's personal appearance must be known to hundreds of thousands of people. This is the only large measure I've been able to take so far, but it's a considerable

step in the right direction. But, though I suspect you may loathe the publicity, I strongly advise you to go further and authorize me, provided nothing has been heard of the man by this evening, to instruct the B.B.C. to broadcast the fact that he is missing. This move might be followed up by publishing in a few of to-morrow's more important newspapers the offer of a reward for any information leading to his whereabouts. This is a matter for you to decide; personally, I imagine the B.B.C. announcement will do the job—there'll be few enough papers that won't publish such a bit of exciting press copy on their own. But I do most strongly urge you to make use of the B.B.C.'

'So be it,' I agreed, 'if there's no news of him by what?—eight o'clock?'

'Better say seven; that should give the B.B.C. plenty of time. I'll arrange it all with the help of the police, using your name if I may instead of Mrs. Scrimgeour's.' I nodded, and he went on: 'Speed, you see, is absolutely essential,' he said, 'whatever view we take of Scrimgeour's disappearance. Whether he's out of his mind; whether he's the victim of some foul play; whether he's a criminal himself; whatever may have happened, we can't afford to waste a moment's time. This, of course, even more for Scrimgeour's own sake than from the point of view of justice and the police. I don't think there's anything more to say, Mr. Blair, except that I'll either be along here by seven, or else I'll ring you up. If you get any news this end, perhaps you'll be good enough to ring me up; you'll find my 'phone number in the book.'

'One moment, Pittendrieck,' I said, as he was going through the door: 'what do you advise me to say to Mrs. Scrimgeour when she comes? She is sure to ask me for your definite opinion.'

He looked at me with the faintest glint of humour in his keen, hard eyes. 'I haven't got a definite opinion,' he replied. 'It wouldn't surprise me to hear in a couple of hours' time that Scrimgeour had casually strolled back through his own front door; nor would it surprise me to be told that he was dead. If you have to say anything to his mother, you can do less harm by hinting

at the first rather than at the second of the alternatives. As you have a choice in the matter, it's obviously the kindlier thing to do. Good morning ; see you later.'

With which valedictory remark and a rasping laugh, he left the room and the house.

I took a deep breath, and looked thoughtfully at the fire. Pittendrieck, I mused, was without any dubiety a square peg in a square hole ; the sort of fellow who would go through the flames of Tophet in search of his legitimate prey, the sort of fellow you'd be deuced glad to have on your side instead of up against you. But I could not say that he was my *beau idéal* of a grateful companion.

CHAPTER VII

PRESENTLY, the waitress coming in to lay the table, I went in search of Daphne and Nigel, and found them by way of attending to the household duties munching apples together in front of the library fire. At sight of me Nigel at once jumped up and insisted on ensconcing me in the chair he had vacated, the two of them afterwards listening with intense interest to the rapid account I gave of my interview with Pittendrieck. I kept nothing back from them with the exception of Nigel's explanation of the reason of his quarrel with Julian, feeling anything but certain whether, in spite of his former protestations on the subject, he would actually have enlightened Daphne on the point. Only once was I interrupted during the course of the yarn, and this was when I had reported the detective's suspicions regarding Nigel himself *en gros et en détail*.

It was Daphne who was responsible for the interruption. 'Your detective's a silly ass,' said she, with racy conviction. Then she turned to Nigel. 'You may, for all I know, be a scoundrel of the deepest dye,' she laughingly asserted, 'but I'm willing to go bail with all that remains

to me of the last beggarly quarterly allowance I get from this skinflint of a parent of mine that you're not a liar, my lad.'

'Haven't enough brains,' he agreed, by way of apology, though from the look of gratitude which at once appeared on his countenance I judged him rather to have accepted this double-egged tribute to his worth with a profound sense of satisfaction.

This pleasantry put us all in such good humour that, the gong going at that moment, we returned to the dining-room and discussed a succulent shoulder of lamb, a luscious apple-pie, and a first-rate Roquefort cheese with great enjoyment. By common consent any reference during the meal to Julian's affair was pronounced taboo, and it wasn't till the port was going round that Daphne suggested she should motor Nigel out to tea at Hawkstane in the afternoon so that he might acquaint his people with all that was happening. For me she prescribed my customary after-dinner nap, and, promising to deliver a message to Tom Balbirny bidding him come and see me in the morning, assured me she'd be home without fail by seven o'clock.

She turned up promptly to time, but without her companion. On inquiring what had become of him, I was informed that she had dropped him 'by request' at his diggings. She was to make his apologies to me for his inability to spend the rest of the day with us as he had promised, and to explain that he had forgotten a previous engagement when accepting my invitation. I thought little of this message at the time, dismissing it from my mind as a matter of trivial import. If I could only have known what lay behind its innocent appearance, I should hardly have treated it as nonchalantly as I did.

Five minutes later Pittendriech rang us up. He explained that he had been too busily employed on his quest to come round himself, but said he had nothing of importance to report. He asked for my orders in the matter of the B.B.C., and was authorized to take such steps as he considered necessary. Whence it came about that Daphne and I with a sort of morbid interest listened in to an S.O.S., which, as my readers will be the first to admit, fairly electrified the whole of the British Isles.

They will recollect the fact that the sole reason advanced for Julian's unaccountable disappearance was that he was 'believed to be suffering from a temporary loss of memory,' and they will not have forgotten the kindly rider which the announcer personally added to the bald official statement. It was to the effect that all perplexities concerning Julian's unexpected breakdown in the International match would now be set at rest by the prompt publication of the distressing news which it had been his melancholy duty to broadcast, and it ended with an expression of hope, which he was sure would be shared by all his hearers, that the publicity just given to the unfortunate occurrence would result in the discovery of so gallant and famous a Rugby player within the next twenty-four hours.

I was watching Daphne as the message, in all its stark nudity (if I may so describe the curious effect it had upon me) was coming through, and I noticed that she seemed to be moved a little beyond her usual wont. But she made no comment at the time, and afterwards had no opportunity. For, within three minutes of the announcement, the telephone bell rang (more violently than usual, as it seemed to me) and she was kept occupied for most of the rest of the evening answering call after call—which 'busyness,' I reflected, as I recalled the original meaning of the word, might well prove to be a blessing in disguise if the anxiety she felt concerning Julian's fate weighed too heavily upon her.

My share in the evening's proceedings was limited to granting an interview to an urgent and agitated representative of *The Caledonian*, and to extending a warm but wholly fictitious welcome to Effie Scrimgeour when she arrived. The young journalist, who was all agog to dish up a sensational tit-bit for his readers' consumption the following morning, was provided with a strictly-guarded version of what he called 'The Mystery of The Hour'—all in capital letters—and was finally dismissed in a distinctly crestfallen condition. After all, as I carefully explained to him, I couldn't very well tell him anything definite when I knew nothing definite myself. I could see that he didn't believe me, though I will do him the justice to say that he tried hard not to show me the fact. That's

the worst of these newspaper fellows; they are whiles tempted to stultify any sense of proportion they may possess by unreservedly sacrificing it to the Moloch of sensationalism.

Effie Scrimgeour, whose woe-begone expression, even though I was conscious that fully fifty per cent of it was being put on, would have melted a harder heart than that which happened to be mine, was, on the other hand, so selfishly unselfish as to relieve me of the immediate necessity of attempting to offer my condolences. She announced in tones choking with emotion that she knew that Julian was dead, and that all she wanted to do was to die too. So, in a thoughtless and unguarded moment, I contented myself with wishing her a gentle 'good-night.' Only to find myself being reproachfully asked how anybody could possibly be so unsympathetic as to imagine that she'd ever have such a thing—'such an unutterable blessing' were her exact words—as a good night again. Whereupon Daphne came to my assistance, and half-led, half-supported the poor lady upstairs to bed.

I lit a last pipe and lay stretched in my chair, pondering over the amazing complexities of life. What had Harry Scrimgeour seen in Effie that he should have picked her out of a hundred more attractive women and taken her to wife? Had he been so blinded by passion as to be absolutely incapable of seeing what manner of fearsome wild-fowl she was? Had he given no thought as to the disastrous influence she must inevitably have exerted on the character of any child that might be born of her? Had he—but why go on? These, and fifty similar questions passed through my worried brain, and never an answer could I find to any one of them. Only of this conclusion was I satisfied. that, whatever had now happened to Julian, he was not wholly to be blamed. At least an equal share of responsibility for his downfall, if downfall it turned out to be, must be laid on the shoulders of his parents. I had reached this conclusion just as Daphne came downstairs, when I found to my astonishment that she had been nearly an hour away.

'High time you were in your little cot, old man,' she said, as she came into the room.

'I had no idea it was so late,' I answered, feebly enough. 'How's your guest?'

'Well, to begin with, she was just too utterly utter,' said my daughter, with irreverent mirth. 'But I persuaded her to try a little food. She first of all swore that the least morsel would make her sick, but nevertheless she swallowed the wing of a chicken and a whacking big helping of trifle before she knew where she was—and that did her a lot of good. She has, also, just swallowed two aspirin tablets and one tablespoonful of a cardinal specific for flat—'

'Daphne!' I hastened to interpose, 'go to bed!'

'—ulency, strongly recommended by Father Sadde,' continued my unabashed daughter, entirely ignoring my injunction. 'She is now safely tucked up in bed, with one hot-water bottle at her feet and another hot-water bottle on her stom—oh!—er—her tummy, I mean.'

'Daphne,' I said, reprovingly, 'you're quite incorrigible.'

'Well,' she laughed, 'you asked me how my guest was.' Then, influenced by one of those bewildering but charming changes of mood which she had inherited from her mother, she dropped her gay manner and suddenly became grave. 'Dad,' she said earnestly, 'I don't understand people like Effie; she goes through such tremendously emotional disturbances, and yet never seems to be one penny the worse for them.'

'I've noticed that myself,' I replied. 'Which, perhaps, accounts for what Effie would call my lack of sympathy. Hubert Brett once told me that her emotional crises were never one tenth as bad as she considered them to be. He said they were the grown-up equivalent of the attacks of jim-jams she used to have in her nursery days, and only regretted that it was now too late for him to administer the—er—proper and appropriate remedy.'

Daphne laughed long and merrily, looked enquiringly at me, and finished up by whispering three words in my ear.

'Daphne,' I laughed back, 'to use one of your elegant expressions, you're the frozen limit!' And I pulled her head down, and kissed her on the lips.

'You're a bit out of date, old thing,' she chuckled gleefully, 'but—er—but I'm glad my early education was

not neglected.' Then she got up and ordered me off to bed.

It would be well for the sons and daughters of men, I thought, as I lay there later on and recalled the little scene, if they would realize once and for all how often comedy—that gentle handmaid—creeps ever as closely behind the footsteps of tragedy—that stately dame—as she dares. If, as has been said, laughter is akin to tears, surely it must follow that tears are as nearly related to laughter. Happy and fortunate, I reflected, each and every individual who, having once appreciated the fact, should never forget the same. Wherefore I proceeded to live up to my own philosophy, and was speedily asleep. I remember my last conscious thought was a sort of dreamy wonder as to what incidents, grave or gay, the morrow would bring to our doors.

It brought Tom and Alice Balbirny, early visitors eager and anxious to help; it brought the 'great' Haggerstoun Grice, sardonic, inquisitive, itching to give advice on any and every conceivable point; it brought the Reverend Father Aloysius Sadde, portly, urbane, condescending, and full of an oleaginous sympathy for the pet lamb of his diminutive flock; and, finally, it brought a telegram, as intriguing as it was unexpected. Let me deal shortly with each of these incidents in turn.

Alice Balbirny having gone upstairs with Daphne to try the soothing balm of her common sense on the unfortunate Effie Scrimgeour, who, owing to the fact that she hadn't had a wink of sleep all night, was utterly unable to leave her bed and the comfortable appurtenances thereof, I had a business talk with Tom.

Once allow him to get a regular spate of devastating and often irrelevant criticism—half-meant, half-invented—off his chest, there is no man more capable of taking a sane and practical view of any situation. For a couple of minutes he roundly and impartially cursed people and things that, perhaps, should have been cursed, and people and things that certainly should not. In particular, he consigned the wretched Effie Scrimgeour to perdition for still daring to continue to exist, and her trustees for ever having been such blithering idiots as to take on their

thankless job. I let him ramble on, and presently his irascible temper having been thus characteristically relieved, he settled down to discuss the question of ways and means as calmly and sensibly as if his feelings had never been ruffled in the slightest degree.

We decided to set aside a reasonable sum of money for such expenses as our employment of Pittendrieck might legitimately entail, and afterwards, until Alice came down, tried hard to recall any trait of weakness in Julian's character which might have prepared us for his present mysterious escapade. For that it was only something in the nature of an escapade Tom, I may mention, was quite convinced. He advanced, as I thought, a sound reason for his opinion when he said that Julian had always given him the impression of being less of a man than his achievements generally had shown him to be, and he illustrated his point by one or two apt anecdotes which could only demonstrate the curious suggestibility of the young fellow's mental make-up as it now was. He instanced, too, certain infantile reactions to disappointment and failure which still persisted, and argued from all this that two of Pittendrieck's theories were nothing but moonshine.

'I owe Julian a debt of gratitude which I can never repay,' he finished up, 'and I'll spare neither pains nor money to do all I can for him in his present predicament. But we shan't help him by making him out a greater hero than he is. And you may take it from me that he's not the sort of fellow either to commit a crime or to be the victim of a criminal outrage. No, I still think you'll find that his disappearance will turn out to be due to a tremendously childish reaction following an infinitely bigger failure than any he has yet been called upon to face. Think of it, Colin; if you'd played the pitiable game he did on Saturday, you'd want to go and drown yourself, tough as you are! All the more so, if you'd been doping yourself to the extent he seems from all accounts to have done.'

There was much in what he said, and I told him I should only be too delighted if his supposition turned out to be correct. Whereupon, satisfied that he had converted me to his way of thinking, he cheerfully took his departure

along with his wife. But he was deceiving himself as regarded my conversion; I was very far from accepting any such superficial solution of the problem before us as was contained in the light-hearted explanation he had thought fit to suggest.

My attitude in the matter was strengthened by the conversation I had with Haggerstoun Grice, who arrived at the house five minutes after Tom had gone. I have alluded to this man as the 'great' Haggerstoun Grice simply and solely because everybody in Edinburgh did the same. You would hear them saying: 'Yes, Haggerstoun Grice, you know—a great man.' And if they were occasionally tempted to add the words, 'especially in his own estimation,' the implied criticism was nearly always spoken in a tone of voice which robbed it of any suspicion of unfriendliness or spite. He was a well-to-do bachelor of fifty, a dilettante writer of monographs on every sort of conceivable subject, an entertaining companion, an inveterate gossip, and, above all, a universal and welcome dinner guest. Though they might laugh at him behind his back, everybody liked him and, moreover, valued his opinion and advice on all sorts of questions, abstruse or otherwise. He had a very sincere interest in human nature and all its foibles, and I was by no means alone in thinking that the man's intrusive and superior manner in reality covered a mind as acute and discerning as it was sensitive and shy. Coupled with the rather sardonic cast of countenance that was his—it flashed through my mind that there was some sort of resemblance between him and Christie Pittendriech—this manner made him appear a deal more formidable than he really was.

I might have known that he would have turned up, for this case of Julian's was exactly the sort of thing that was likely to excite his curiosity, but in the general hustle which had occurred on Sunday I had forgotten his existence. I now hailed him with delight, and in response to his keen inquiries gave him—as far as it went—an accurate account of the situation up to date. In particular, I asked his opinion on the various suppositions which had been put forward as explanatory of the vanishing of Julian, because I felt that his considered verdict would be well worth

hearing. There is little need to detail all he said; it will be sufficient to record the fact that he was as scornfully intolerant of Tom Balbirny's notion as he was distinctly distrustful of Pittendrieck's suggestion that Julian might have burgled his own rooms. He was much more inclined to think that Julian had been the victim of foul play, basing his belief on one point which had hitherto escaped my mind. He admitted that in the absence of any real knowledge on the all-important question of motive—either on Julian's part or anybody else's—he could do no more than guess at what had happened. But he said that when you were confronted with three or more unlikely alternatives it was sound policy to choose the least unlikely of the lot. Why anybody should desire to put Julian out of the way he had no idea, but from his knowledge of the man himself he felt practically certain than any other supposition was a 'wash-out.' He returned more than once to a consideration of the telegram which had been received from London, and insisted that it was of the first importance for us to ferret out the name and the address of the sender.

'You get Pittendrieck—good man, Pittendrieck, if he wasn't such a bumptious little beast—to concentrate on that particular clue,' he ordered, in his dictatorial way, 'and see what comes of it.'

'Rather like looking for a needle in a bundle of hay—finding the fellow,' I ventured to suggest.

'Not a bit of it,' he retorted. 'It's amazing how frequently and stupidly your crook gives himself away.'

I think he had hardly finished when Daphne came into the room and handed me a telegram. 'Any answer?' she asked. 'The boy's waiting to know.'

She shook hands with our visitor while I slit the envelope and spread open the form inside. After a little gasp of astonishment, I read aloud the message inscribed thereon. "Just seen newspaper account Julian Scrimgeour's disappearance. Acting his letter of instruction, sent telegram Sunday morning. Forwarding letter registered post. Writing. Susan Swayne."

I handed the flimsy pink sheet to Haggerstoun Grice. 'I don't know what the deuce it all means,' I commented,

'but on the face of it, it would seem that Susan Swayne—whoever she may be—is at least no crook.'

'And how d'you know that?' he demanded, glowering at me over the top of the sheet of paper. 'Susan Swayne!' he snorted, and repeated the name twice. 'I don't like your Susan Swayne, I promise you!' And he got up from his chair—we were in the dining-room—and wandered over towards the window.

I laughed at this characteristic reply, and turned to Daphne. 'Any idea who she is?' I asked.

'Not an earthly,' replied my daughter, somewhat unfeelingly as I thought.

'If you take my advice, Blair, you'll put this missive into Pittendriech's hands as soon as you can,' Haggerstoun Grice broke in, coming back from the window and returning the telegram to me. 'Why doesn't the silly woman give her address?' he snapped out almost in the same breath and as irritably as might be. 'Pretty suspicious that, eh? I'd like to stop and discuss things with you a bit further, but I've just caught sight of a fellow I've no desire to meet. I'd no idea you knew the rogue.'

'What rogue?' asked Daphne.

'Why, that Jesuit in disguise, Father Aloysius Sadde. Saw him standing on your doorstep, patting the telegraph boy on the head,' he said in a tone of comical disgust. 'Besides, he bores me; last time I met him, told me a rotten story I'd invented myself thirty years ago. Daphne, my dear, be an angel and see that he's piloted into another room while I slip out of the house.'

'And, Daphne, tell the boy there's no answer,' I said, as she turned to go.

'And beseech him to beware of temptation,' Haggerstoun Grice added, as she went through the door and closed it behind her. 'What the devil does Sadde want here?' he blazed out as soon as she was gone.

'I imagine he's come to condole with Mrs. Scrimgeour,' I replied.

He pondered this answer for a moment or two. Then: 'Tell her from me to give him a pretty wide berth,' he said, with a ringing note of angry scorn in his voice. 'If half I've heard of him is true, the scamp ought to have

been unfrocked years ago—dashed expressive word “unfrocked,” especially in his case!—but unfortunately there's nobody in authority over him. Runs a sort of a church of his own, I believe, and he'll jolly well not unfrock himself, so long as he can get the petticoats to run after him. Well, warn Mrs. Scrimgeour about him, Blair, and let Pittendriech know about that wire at once. See you again in a day or two.'

I accompanied him on my crutches to the front door, and then went to the library to 'phone to Pittendriech. There I discovered Mr. Sadde beaming benevolently on Daphne, who, I regret to say, indicated her opinion of our latest visitor by making use of a silent but extremely expressive gesture of disapproval—a gesture discarded since her nursery days, but evidently resurrected as being alone adequate to cope with the present situation—as soon as he turned from her to shake hands with me. I asked her to take him into the dining-room, saying I'd be with him as soon as I'd put a telephone call through. I manipulated the automatic machine, and was answered immediately by a man who, as I judged from the clear tenor voice in which he spoke, was certainly not the detective himself. He explained that he was one of Pittendriech's assistants of the name of Hope, and said that his principal was out. He added, however, that he was expected back at any moment and had left orders that any fresh information about the Scrimgeour case was to be carefully taken down and reported to him on his return. I therefore repeated the exact wording of Susan Swayne's telegram to this fellow, and bade him tell Pittendriech to ring me up at the earliest possible moment. Then, thinking it only decent to relieve Daphne of her uncongenial occupation as quickly as might be, I hobbled back to the dining-room.

To my surprise I found Mr. Sadde alone. He was sitting as far back as he could get into the most comfortable armchair in the room, and made little or no effort to leave it when I limped in. A pompous, smug, self-sufficient, smarmy individual, I thought him, with no small share of that rude nonchalance of manner that is all too often mistaken by the unwary for a subtle strength of

mind. It is nothing of the sort ; it simply indicates the reaction exhibited by an ill-bred mind to too generous a diet of stupid and thoughtless admiration. The fellow was handsome enough in his way ; he looked his part to perfection, though there was a looseness of mouth and a shiftiness of eye about his countenance which was easily perceptible to all who had the honour of his acquaintance with the exception of his dupes. But I am the last person to deny that he hadn't more than a mere modicum of brains ; it takes quite a lot of intelligence to please as well as to control a fair-sized crowd of neurotics belonging to the male and the female sex.

I asked what had become of Daphne, and was informed that she had gone upstairs for the purpose of finding out whether Mrs. Scrimgeour was well enough to receive him. 'A poor, feeble creature,' he went on to describe the lady in question, 'with a mind like a jelly and the heart of a timid doe. A shorn lamb, for whose sake it is my great privilege to do what little I can to temper the cruel winds of adversity that must of necessity beat upon us all.'

This fellow was even worse than I had expected he would be. I had not thought it conceivable that anyone could have talked as he did at this time of day. My sound foot itched to kick him out of doors, and kicked out he might easily have been, had I not called to mind Pittendriech's earnest injunction to me to keep an eye on him. So I set to work reluctantly, as may well be imagined, to try and discover how far 'ben'—to use an expressive Scottish phrase—he was with Effie Scrimgeour. He parried all my inquiries by a series of soft answers, unctuously spoken and calculated, I suppose, to turn away my wrath. Nevertheless I at least succeeded in finding out that the woman was completely under his dominance as far as what he called her soul was concerned. That he had obtained this dominance purely by skilfully playing upon her fears I had very little doubt, and, in spite of his assurance that his ministrations had had the most beneficial effect on her, my feeling of repugnance towards the man began to increase. I choked down my dislike, however, and, mindful of Pittendriech's instructions, presently switched

the discussion over from Effie to her son. What was his candid opinion of Julian? I asked.

I got a long and somewhat rambling answer to the effect that, if the truth were known, half of Mrs. Scrimgeour's troubles in the past had been solely due to her anxiety about her son. It was not so much that he did not treat her with all proper filial affection and respect, as that she was becoming increasingly aware that she was fast losing touch with him. He no longer took her into his confidence as he used to do, with the result that there was now a gulf between them, which all her loving interest in his welfare was apparently powerless to bridge. I surely could not wonder that she was puzzled by this unnecessary reticence, nor blame her for feeling more than a trifle hurt. He himself had volunteered to intercede with Julian on the point, and had only been snubbed for his pains, the usual bitter reward for the peacemaker in this unkindly world.

If this account were true, it was news to me. I had not of late had many opportunities of seeing mother and son together, but I had certainly not noticed any particular change in their relationship towards each other. If I had been Julian, I should have objected to the public demonstrations of maternal affection, but even in this matter he had shown exemplary patience with her.

'How long has all this been going on?' I asked.

'For the past six months at least,' he replied.

'Well,' I went on, 'you can't expect a man of twenty-eight to be tied for ever to his mother's apron-strings.'

'No,' he agreed, 'you can't. Not any more than you can expect a mother to feel particularly happy when she sees her son, her only son, replacing his old friends with others of a less desirable type.'

At this moment I had a sudden inspiration. 'D'you know Susan Swayne?' I rapped out.

I'll swear he started slightly, though he instantly recovered himself, sufficiently, at any rate, to answer the question without any great hesitation. 'Susan Swayne?' he echoed. 'No; who is she?'

'That's what I want to find out,' I returned. 'Possibly she's one of Julian's less desirable friends.'

'He hasn't brought her to the house,' he replied, with a

cool assurance which clearly showed how much at home there he considered himself to be. 'That's just what Mrs. Scrimgeour complains of. She feels that he——'

I don't suppose it mattered much what she felt, but Daphne came into the room at that moment and Sadde's remark was never finished. She announced that Mrs. Scrimgeour was ready to receive him in the drawing-room, and he responded to the invitation with so prompt and suspicious an alacrity as to make me sure of the fact that he had not been exactly enjoying himself during his conversation with me. I got a certain amount of malicious satisfaction out of this reflection, while Daphne was taking him upstairs, as well as out of the thought that I'd have something of importance to tell to Pittendriech. So that, when she came down, I was altogether in a cheerful mood.

'Daphne,' I said, 'I'm beginning to get a bit keener on this detective work; there's something rather intriguing in it. I feel that either you or I ought to creep stealthily up to the drawing-room door, and listen through the key-hole to all that those two worthies have to say.'

She did not respond to my humour. 'Dad,' she said, with a touch of wistfulness in her voice that made me look quickly up, 'I wish I could tell you how much I loathe the whole business.'

'My dear,' I hastened to reply, when I saw how grave she was, 'I'm sorry I said that. I was really only joking.'

But to myself I had to admit, after she had gone, that this apology of mine was not so strictly true as it might, and ought to, have been.

CHAPTER VIII

IT was only in response to the urgent requests of a few of my old friends, who felt, as I did myself, that garbled and on many points erroneous accounts of the case of Julian Scrimgeour should not be allowed to go uncontradicted, that I consented to undertake the task

of giving an exact and, so far as the truth will ever be known, a veracious report to the public. It was not without serious misgivings as to my fitness for the rôle assigned to me that I took up my pen, and in connexion with this it pleases me to record how greatly I sympathized with a youthful niece of mine, who has a fondness for writing stories herself, and who only the other day naively complained to me that she never knew whether to use 'I's' or 'the's' in hers.

I found myself in a similar predicament when I started mine; I couldn't for the life of me decide whether I should make use of the first person or the third. I will so far take the reader into my confidence as to inform him that, after I had written the first chapter of this yarn in the latter manner, I tore it up and adopted the former plan. Now I wish I hadn't, because I am beginning to see difficulties crowding fast upon me. But I flatly refuse to jettison seven chapters to get out of the mess—that would be asking too much, even from myself. Besides, my youthful niece, who has read the manuscript as far as it has gone, encourages me to carry on. She says that there is now no doubt in her mind as to which type of story she prefers; in her opinion 'the "I's" have it' every time.

As a matter of fact, I tried hard to induce Hubert Brett to tell the tale, but without success. He said that, apart from the fact that I had been very closely connected with the affair from start to finish—especially at the finish—and was therefore obviously the man for the job, there was also another reason why I might consider myself as an almost ideal editor of a mystery tale. And in support of this statement, he went on to explain that nobody who knew me in the slightest degree would, or could, harbour the least doubt about my own personal innocence for a single moment of time.

There was, as I think he meant there should be, a sting in that word 'innocence.' Granted that my criminal potentialities are deplorably feeble, there is no denying the soft impeachment that I was as much 'taken in' over the case of Julian Scrimgeour as was anybody else. Whether I should have been so bamboozled or not is another matter, which the reader may decide for himself

when, and if, he reaches the end of this book. It will be entirely my fault if I do not succeed in puzzling him a bit more—more, I mean, than he is already puzzled—before he arrives at that destination.

Pittendrieck—to get on with my story, and with apologies for the digression above—rang me up when Father Sadde had been closeted with Mrs. Scrimgeour for about half an hour, and, hearing that the fellow was still in the house, begged leave to come along and have a word with him. I gave a ready permission, bade him come with speed, and promised to detain the padre till he arrived. He drove up in his own car seven minutes later on, and I had a little talk with him before we interviewed Sadde.

He told me he had already been in telephonic communication with his agent in London—a fellow of the name of Hudson—who thought he ought to be able to get in touch with Susan Swayne without the slightest difficulty. Her telegram, as I should have said before, had been despatched from the Notting Hill Gate Post Office, and Pittendrieck said that Hudson was doubtless on his way there now with a view of starting his investigations from that point. After I had informed him of my suspicion that Sadde knew more about Miss Swayne than he was prepared to admit, he gave me a brief account of the steps he himself had taken to rouse into a state of activity all the professional resources at his command. Once he had his machinery running at full speed, he was confident that so far as Edinburgh was concerned he would be able to lay his hands on Julian, if that young man were still in hiding in the city, within twenty-four hours.

He finished up by telling me of the interview he had had with Dr. Barnaby Fagan. That shady practitioner, as he called him, had been frightened into an unwilling confession concerning the drugs he had used in his treatment of the case. His story was to the effect that he had had to adopt what he described as certain heroic measures in view of the urgency of the matter. Julian had apparently insisted on the absolute necessity of being fit for the match; at all costs, he had said, he must be right for that. Whereupon, Fagan had, though admittedly

much against his better judgment, given the patient a rather stronger narcotic pill than he was in the habit of prescribing. This pill Julian had taken on retiring to bed for the five nights preceding the match, and had in consequence obtained the restful sleep of which he had been so sorely in need. Interrogated further by Pittendrieck, Fagan had also owned up to having administered a stiff dose of strychnine hypodermically an hour and a half before the game began.

Questioned as to the composition of the narcotic pills, he had made no bones about revealing the exact formula. I do not record the formula here for obvious reasons, but Hubert Brett, whom I consulted on the point, was almost lyrical in his condemnation of the ingredients. His opinion was that the only reputable bit of Fagan's conduct from a professional point of view was to be found in the exhibition of the strychnine injection. By giving that, he snorted, the fellow had at least endeavoured to make some sort of feeble reparation for his contemptible, if not culpable, ignorance of the principles and practice of medicine. It is as well to add that Fagan had himself dispensed the pills, and had handed them over one by one to Julian each day. It may also be mentioned that on a careful analysis being made of them later on they were found to be identical in all respects with the formula alluded to above.

It was nearly noon when we requested Mr. Sadde's attendance in the dining-room. On his appearance—he came in beaming all over with an unctuous self-satisfaction—I introduced him to Pittendrieck, and now testify to the best of my knowledge and belief that the report which I am about to give of the conversation which ensued between them is substantially and almost word for word correct.

'I think I have had the pleasure of meeting you once before, Mr. Sadde,' Pittendrieck began, his keen eyes searching the other's countenance with a grim, fierce look.

'Indeed?' responded Sadde, with a suspicion of annoyance in his tone. 'I regret I have no knowledge of the occasion.'

'I will assist your memory, if I may,' Pittendrieck went

on, as imperturbably persistent as ever. 'We met at Mrs. Pat Moriarty's house in Cork on Armistice night, 1918.'

Sadde's self-complacent expression wilted before this reply. 'You must be mistaken,' he managed to stammer out after a suspicious pause. 'I have never even heard of the lady.'

Pittendriech smiled, and a dashed unpleasant smile I thought it was. 'Well,' he said, somewhat to my surprise, 'perhaps I'm wrong. Anyway, it doesn't much matter. Now, Mr. Sadde, we are hoping you'll be willing to help us to the best of your ability in this mysterious business of Scrimgeour's. I take it you're pretty intimate with the family next door?'

The relief exhibited by the parson at this sudden shelving of an awkward topic of conversation was very obvious. He recovered his equanimity almost as quickly as he had lost it, and made a most amiable response. 'I shall be glad to do anything in my power to help,' said he. 'You can have no idea how gratefully I should welcome the chance of contributing my mite towards lessening the suspense which is overwhelming his poor mother. My heart is wrung——'

'Quite so,' Pittendriech interrupted, rather brutally. 'There's no doubt about that,' he added, in sarcastic tones and with a leer in my direction. Then he got right down to his examination of the man. 'You were at Mrs. Scrimgeour's on Saturday evening,' he went on abruptly. 'At what hour did you leave the house?'

'About half-past ten, I think.'

'Did Mrs. Scrimgeour let you out of the house?'

'Yes.'

'Now—I want you to think very carefully—did you go down the steps at once, or did you happen to remain for a space of time just outside the front door?'

'I remained near the front door until I had opened my umbrella. It was raining hard at the time. But why do you ask?'

'Because I wish to know if by any chance you heard Mrs. Scrimgeour snib the door after she had closed it behind you?'

Sadde looked up quickly. 'Curious you should ask me that,' he said. 'I did think I heard the little catch shot home, and wondered at the time why she had done it. I very nearly knocked at the door to remind her that her son was still out, and would have done so had I not immediately afterwards caught a sound which satisfied me that she had rectified her error.'

I glanced quickly at Pittendrieck, wondering how he would receive this bit of information. It scarcely coincided with Effie's account.

He took no notice of me. 'Are you sure of this, Mr. Sadde?' he asked.

'Well, I wouldn't absolutely swear to it,' was the reply, 'but such was the impression I got.'

Pittendrieck said nothing for a moment, but appeared to be thinking hard. Then: 'What did you do after that?' he asked.

'I went straight home.'

'And to bed?'

'And to bed. Sunday, you see, is a busy day for me.'

'Did anyone actually see you enter your house?'

This leading question was a bit too much for the reverend gentleman. 'I don't see what right you have to ask me that,' he protested, in a huffed tone.

'Nevertheless,' Pittendrieck retorted, 'I shall be glad if you will reply. There surely is no earthly nor heavenly reason why you shouldn't.'

He seemed to be playing with Sadde as a cat might play with a mouse. I could only conjecture that his reference to Cork and Mrs. Moriarty had been deliberately designed to warn the parson of the danger he ran in attempting to play fast and loose with his questioner. Sadde was evidently of the same opinion, if I was to judge from his reply.

'No,' he said, with an uneasy laugh, 'I really can think of none. If it's any satisfaction to you to know the fact, I let myself into my house quite unobserved. My house-keeper, I feel sure, had long since retired for the night.'

'And once in bed, you stayed there till the morning?'

'Certainly,' said Sadde. Then: 'Are you—are you

suspecting me of having committed the burglary next door?' he demanded indignantly.

'How did you know a burglary had been committed?' the detective snapped out, turning on his victim like a terrier pounces on a rat.

'How did I know?' Sadde repeated the words in a dazed sort of way as if he did not quite comprehend their meaning. Then, all of a sudden, his face cleared, and he gave a little laugh. 'Why,' he said, 'I've just been hearing all about it from Mrs. Scrimgeour upstairs.'

'Ah, yes, I'd forgotten all about that probability,' Pittendriech went on, as calmly as if he'd been discussing the weather instead of hinting plainly at the ugly suspicion that appeared to be in his mind. 'Well, now,' he continued, 'if you've been hearing all about it upstairs, perhaps you can tell us if Mrs. Scrimgeour has any theory to account for what has happened? I asked her myself yesterday, I should perhaps explain, but got nothing out of her. She gave me a long list of her son's virtues, which information did not help me at all. But she also said a good deal about your kindness to her, and I am wondering whether she has been more explicit with you?'

The tone in which Pittendriech delivered all this was so offensive that, if I had been in Sadde's shoes, I should assuredly have felt inclined to knock the fellow down. That I held no brief for the parson I freely admit, but bullying in any shape or form has always fairly stimulated my instinct of pugnacity. I am bound to say, however, that my feeling of anger on this particular occasion would have taken longer to simmer down had the man made any sort of effort to stand up for himself. As it was, he acted like a poltroon—and I've even less use for the coward than I have for the bully.

It is true he made a pitiable sort of attempt to stand on a dignity he did not possess. 'Mrs. Scrimgeour honours me too much by attributing any such kindness to me,' he said. 'But, believe me, Mr. Pittendriech, I should rightly deserve to forfeit any claim I might have had to her praises, had I been callous enough even to try and coax any confidence out of her in her present deplorable state.'

'Tut! Mr. Sadde,' retorted Pittendriech. 'This is no

time for a display of sentimentality. Can't you see that we're all—and especially the lady—up against the concrete fact that her son is missing. And I tell you that in my opinion—and I think I may say that I know what I'm talking about—each hour that passes renders the task in front of us more and more difficult. It's no exaggeration to say that, if we can't trace him soon, it's likely he never will be traced.'

'Do you mean that he may be dead?' asked Sadde, in an awe-struck voice.

'You can hardly expect me to answer that question with the meagre knowledge I possess. As I told Mr. Blair here, my customary powers of intuition have so far singularly failed me in this case. I have had to fall back on the everyday methods that the most ordinary detective employs, and I suggest to you that, if there is any bit of information regarding Scrimgeour's past habits or friendships, or his—er—special difficulties or even his dislikes, which you or his mother happen to possess, and which—no matter how trivial it may appear to you—may be of supreme importance to me, it is your duty to speak out.'

The parson listened gravely to this appeal, but took his time before making any reply. Then: 'You place me in an awkward predicament,' he said at last, 'but, impressed as I have been by your account of the urgency of the case, I think I am justified in hinting to you that for the last month or two there have been serious—er—differences of opinion between poor Mrs. Scrimgeour and her son. I—er—am not in a position, owing to my calling, to say anything more definite than that these misunderstandings have in the main been due, as I have already informed Mr. Blair, to the tendency exhibited by Julian to fraternize with some—er—very undesirable friends.'

'You say at once too little or too much,' came Pittendrieck's sharp rejoinder. 'Generalizations are useless for my purpose; they may usually be boiled down to one essential or concrete fact. In other words, I should interpret your statement to mean that Scrimgeour has become—shall we say?—entangled with one particular undesirable friend—probably of the opposite sex.'

Sadde's reception of this 'feeler' plainly showed that

the detective's innuendo had struck home, but this time he proved himself equal to the occasion. 'For the reason I've already given,' he said, with a greater display of firmness than I had expected, 'I must leave you to draw what conclusion you like.'

'Is her name Susan Swayne?'

The question was discharged so forcibly at Sadde that you could almost see him recoil from its impact. It seemed to me that no further protestation on his part could possibly succeed in dissipating the impression created by Pittendriech's direct thrust. All the more so when I called to mind my own former experience on the point. The detective and I kept our eyes glued on the fellow, watching every expression of emotion that passed over his face.

He sprang out of his chair eventually, and began to pace up and down the room. 'I utterly decline to answer your question,' he exclaimed, and then stood angrily facing Pittendriech.

But the more irate he became, the calmer the detective grew. 'It's answered,' he said, with a ready nonchalance that only served to increase the other's wrath. I really thought that the two of them were about to come to fisticuffs.

'It's no more answered than any further insolent demand of yours is likely to be,' retorted Sadde, fairly fuming with rage.

'No matter,' said Pittendriech, with an indescribable air of quiet disdain. 'Believe me I shall find out what I want to know; I imagine Mrs. Scrimgeour—in her son's best interests, mind you—will prove rather less obdurate.'

This was adding fuel to the fire. 'You will oblige me by leaving Mrs. Scrimgeour severely alone,' cried Sadde, blazing with fury. Then he turned to me. 'I trust, Mr. Blair,' he went on, 'that, while the poor dear lady remains under your roof, you will not hesitate to protect her from this man's—I don't wish to be rude, but I can only call it—impertinence.'

I thought it as well to pour a little oil on the troubled waters. 'I will see that she comes to no harm,' I said.

My well-meant effort was not quite successful. Pitten-

driech audibly emitted a jeering guffaw, while Sadde erupted again.

'Otherwise,' he continued, as if I had never spoken, 'I shall do my best to persuade her to seek a temporary refuge elsewhere.'

I stared at him in astonishment, wondering if I had heard aright. 'What d'you mean?' I demanded.

'I will make my meaning quite plain to you both,' he retorted. 'I intend to exercise the proud privilege of shielding a persecuted woman from the slings and arrows of her unkind destiny. A privilege,' he went on, preening himself like a peacock in the most ridiculous way, 'which I am not ashamed to claim openly and as a right; a privilege which became peculiarly mine from the moment Mrs. Scrimgeour consented to accept me as her affianced husband.'

'What?' I exclaimed, in a tone of voice which—now I come to think of it—can scarcely have hidden the feelings of irritation and disgust that swept through my mind at this most unwelcome revelation. The exclamation may have been impolite, but at least it had the merit of being honest. It was the utter unexpectedness of the avowal that fairly knocked me off my steady old perch; I suppose I ought not to have been surprised after Daphne's description of the scene next door, but I certainly was. And I didn't know which of them to damn the more rigorously—Effie for her inconceivable stupidity in being duped by a rogue, or Sadde for his bare-faced exploitation of a fond and futile female fool. I remember glancing at Pittendriech to see how he had taken the news. He was regarding the parson with an expression extraordinarily indicative of supreme and sneering contempt. But, though I have taken a minute or two to write all this down, there was in reality no interval of time between my exclamation and Sadde's indignant reply.

'Mr. Blair,' he said, 'this is not the moment that I should preferably have chosen for the declaration of my engagement to Mrs. Scrimgeour, but circumstances have been too strong for me. They have forced me to adopt an attitude, which, though it may meet with your disapproval, I propose to maintain. I shall use such influence

as I have with her to persuade Mrs. Scrimgeour either to return to her own domicile, or to the house of friends who will not treat her as a child—at one time to be cajoled, at another to be sent to bed. I speak plainly, Mr. Blair, but better, I say, to place her in the care of humble folk who will look after her with a loving sympathy rather than leave her here with people whose outward cordiality is but the veneer which conceals a critical condescension.'

My conscience pricked me somewhat while I listened to this rhetorical effort. I could hardly deny that there was a *souçon* of truth flavouring its apparent sincerity, just as a few drops of Tarragon vinegar added to the meanest of savoury dishes improve its taste. That it was insincere I hadn't the slightest doubt. For all its high falutin verbiage it rang indisputably false, like base coin tested on a counter. I couldn't very well tell the beggar what I thought, but I was in no mood to mince my words. Lord knows we had enough trouble on our hands without this fresh complication.

'Mr. Sadde,' I said, 'you will perhaps do me the justice to believe that I have Mrs. Scrimgeour's interests just as much at heart as you have. I have no desire whatsoever to interfere with her choice of you as a second husband, but, as a trustee of the late General Scrimgeour's will, I mean to place the pros and cons of her action very plainly before her. Meanwhile, she will remain in this house until I have ascertained from her own lips that she wishes to do otherwise. No,' I went on quickly, as he raised his hand in protest, 'I am not going to discuss the matter with you. But, if you like, please go upstairs and talk it over with her.'

He left the room without a word, looking as sulky as a spoilt child deprived of a birthday treat, and I was left alone with Pittendreich. I glanced at the detective, who was engaged in lighting one of his infrequent cigarettes, and then burst into a merry roar of laughter.

He threw the match into the fire and regarded me with some surprise. 'What's amusing you?' he asked.

'If I remember the terms of General Scrimgeour's will correctly,' I replied, rather more seriously, 'his widow loses about four-fifths of the income of his estate on

remarriage. Of course, she had nearly a thousand a year of her own, but I doubt if she—to say nothing of friend Sadde—will appreciate the loss of—let me see—er—about another twelve hundred. I fancy his stipend, whatever it is, will hardly make good the discrepancy, even if he were to go on with his work."

'A doubtful contingency,' remarked Pittendriech in his driest tones.

'So I was going to say,' I went on. Then I pulled myself up with a sudden jerk. 'Damn it all!' I exclaimed, 'if your worst suspicions about Julian are confirmed, Mrs. Scrimgeour will collar the lot. Not only would she be entitled to the whole of the fifteen hundred, which the General left, as her son's next-of-kin, but, under the terms of his own will, which I myself drew up, she'd also get the five hundred a year Julian holds in his own right!'

'I'd no idea there was so much money at stake,' said Pittendriech, in the coolest and most matter-of-fact way, 'but you will now understand why I said I was going to keep a steady eye on the Reverend Father Sadde.'

CHAPTER IX

I THINK it was the sudden explosion of Pittendriech's bomb-shell that finally compelled me to grasp the extreme gravity of the situation. Up till that moment I had been comforting myself with the more or less easy-going reflection that Julian would sooner or later turn up. But this attitude of complacency was finally ended and very completely shattered by the disturbing, if not alarming, hint which the detective had just let fall, and for the future I felt I must throw myself heart and soul into fanning the zeal which—to do him but bare justice—he was already putting into his work.

'The time has come for speaking quite plainly, Mr.

Pittendriech,' I began, ' You, like our friend upstairs, have said either too little or too much.'

He nodded. ' What has puzzled me all along in this case,' he said, ' has been the question of motive. I've been all at sea hitherto in my endeavours to build up any theory that would satisfactorily account for Scrimgeour's disappearance. It has been my invariable habit in all my professional work to start by reducing any problem in front of me down to its simplest component parts. In this case, I asked myself whether it was Scrimgeour himself or somebody else who stood to benefit by his disappearance. If Scrimgeour, what benefit would, or could, accrue to him? If somebody else, who was the most likely person to reap any great advantage, and why? Now, to take Scrimgeour first, from what we've learned of the state of his health, it would appear that he was utterly unfitted to take part in such a nerve-racking game as that played on Saturday. That is the opinion of the two doctors who are cognizant of the facts. But neither of them went so far as to suggest that he was exhibiting any actual sign of insanity, and this is a most important point. To my mind, it does away with any idea of his having vanished or done away with himself for the totally inadequate reason that he had disgraced himself by his feeble play. For, surely, such an action could have only recommended itself to a person who was *non compos mentis* in very truth."

' One moment, Pittendriech,' I interrupted. ' Dr. Fagan told you that he gave Scrimgeour an injection of strychnine before the match, and Fagan, as we know, was recommended to Scrimgeour by Sadde. Under these circumstances, is it not possible that the injection given contained a far more dangerous and deleterious drug? And can you trust any statement made by the doctor on the point? '

' I think so. Fagan is in the devil of a funk over the whole business, and altogether far too frightened to run the risk of making his position worse by telling any unnecessary lies. No, I believe it was only strychnine that was given, though I admit you can't absolutely rule out the possibility you've just suggested. Now, if we may take it that Scrimgeour was not out of his mind, but, on

the contrary, acted as he did for some profoundly urgent purpose of his own, we are faced with the difficulty of discovering, or even imagining, what that purpose was. You have known him intimately for years, and yet I think you would be hard put to it to advance any plausible reason or excuse for his conduct.'

'Yes, that's so. Especially if, as I understand you to mean, he deliberately acted a cowardly part on the football field. That's the bit of your alternative suggestion that I don't see my way to swallow. If for some powerful motive, of the nature of which we are completely ignorant, he felt he simply had to clear out, I can't for the life of me see why he should have smirched his reputation by such an idiotic preliminary canter.'

'Exactly. Of course, I am bound to say that my long experience as a detective has taught me that the most unlikely people every now and then do the most incredible things, but, from my own association with Scrimgeour, I would have been ready to swear that he was the last person in the world to act any stupid part. No, my reason can only lead me to the conclusion that the solution of the problem will be found—if found it can be—by the discovery of some person or persons to whom his disappearance was nothing less than an imperative necessity.'

'I'm beginning to be of the same opinion, but, granted even that his disappearance or—to make no bones about it—his death would be of advantage to Sadde from a monetary point of view, you couldn't describe it as an imperative necessity. We may suspect the parson of being a knave, but I should hesitate to believe he'd pluck enough to commit a crime of any real magnitude whatever.'

'You never know. You saw he didn't like being reminded of Cork and Mrs. Moriarty; I've no doubt he had hoped that the discreditable transaction in which he was then involved had been long ago forgotten. I needn't go into details, Mr. Blair, but you may take it from me that he was mixed up with a crowd of crooks who were, and indubitably are, quite capable of turning their knowledge of this fact to their own advantage. What more likely than they may be exacting such heavy blackmail for their

silence regarding his past indiscretions that he is being put to every sort of desperate expedient for the purpose of meeting their demands? I have every reason to suspect the man of being a renegade priest of some description, and, if Mrs. Moriarty and Co. should be aware of this awkward fact as well, it would simply enable them to give his tail an unpleasant little extra twist whenever they liked to do so.'

'I see. Well, I'm very much obliged to you for the information. It will come in most usefully when I'm dealing with Mrs. Scrimgeour.'

'Yes—when the proper time comes for making use of it. But for the moment, Mr. Blair,—here the detective spoke most decisively—'I must ask you to keep these items of information to yourself. Say anything else you like to the lady; use any other argument that occurs to you to dissuade her from marrying the man, but don't mention a word to her about Mrs. Moriarty or renegade priests.'

I looked inquiringly at him. 'Why not?' I asked.

'Because—don't you see?'—I don't want to alarm him any more than is absolutely necessary. If you acquaint Mrs. Scrimgeour with all we know to Sadde's detriment, he'll sheer off without a moment's hesitation. And that's the last thing I want to happen. I want to have the fellow where I can lay my hands on him at a moment's notice. If he's in the desperate straits I think he is, Mrs. Scrimgeour's not only the magnet I require to hold him near at hand, but it's also possible that she may be the means, all unconsciously to herself, of tempting him to give himself still further away. After all, if the worst comes to the worst and she insists on making a fool of herself, you can always squash the matrimonial project whenever you like.'

I saw the point of this, and agreed to Pittendriech's plan. 'I'll interview the lady after lunch,' I laughed, 'and deal gently with her love affairs.'

'But don't forget that your main object is to get as much information about Sadde out of her as you can. I'm having his movements carefully watched, and, if I find it necessary, I'll apply to the police for further powers.'

But we must remember we've no definite evidence to connect him with Scrimgeour's affair so far; it's merely that some of his doings have aroused suspicion—and serious suspicion at that—that he knows more about it than he's anxious to divulge. I wonder how much longer he means to stay upstairs. I should like to see him again, and I thought I might offer him a lift home in my car.'

Pittendrieck spoke as coolly as if they had been the greatest friends and as if there wasn't the slightest doubt but that his offer would be thankfully accepted. There was an unruffled arrogance about the fellow's confidence in himself and his methods that I have never seen equalled or, indeed, approached in the case of any other man. But I am far from saying it wasn't justified; if my whole association with him taught me nothing else, at least it taught me that.

'You're wondering at my infernal cheek in making the offer,' he went on, noticing the amazed expression on my face. 'Well, I've always found that it has paid me to adopt an attitude of complete indifference to a man's known—or unknown—opinion of me. I usually start by telling him that his likes and dislikes don't matter a tinker's curse to me any more than does his interpretation of the meaning of good or bad, right or wrong. It's wonderful how quickly such an assurance puts him at his ease, especially if he's a person of shady character. As a rule, it calms all his fears, and, incidentally, assists me mightily in my work.' At this point he came to an abrupt pause, and had risen to his feet before he spoke again. 'As you are employing me, Mr. Blair,' he resumed, 'I think it's only right that you should know that there are two people besides Mr. Sadde who are being shadowed by my orders. One of these, you may be surprised to hear, is Mr. Haggerstoun Grice.'

I was. I really was. 'Haggerstoun Grice?' I gasped. 'Why, what the devil has he been doing?'

'A good many things which I don't understand,' Pittendrieck answered, frowning heavily. 'I ought to explain that I've had him under my observation for the last six weeks. Not at all in connexion with Scrimgeour, you understand, but, since, Scrimgeour's disappearance,

I've been putting two and two together and I'm beginning to think that Grice, like Sadde, may know more about it than he's prepared to tell.'

'But—good heavens, man!—you'll be suspecting *me* next,' I exclaimed. 'Why, I've known Haggerstoun Grice intimately for thirty years; he's the very last person to be mixed up with a shady transaction of any sort or kind. It's true he takes a vast interest in anything of the sort, but only, I'll swear, from a purely academic point of view. He was here this morning, and—'

'Yes, I know,' Pittendrieck interrupted, 'and doubtless showed himself immensely intrigued over the latest sensational case. Did you by any chance inform him—but, of course, you must have done—that you had placed the investigation in my hands?'

'I'm afraid I did,' I answered, rather stiffly. 'But, hang it all!—quite a lot of people must be aware of that fact by this time.'

'No doubt,' he replied, shortly enough and as if he were considerably annoyed. 'May I ask if he made any particular comment when he heard I was engaged on the case?'

I chortled with mirth. 'Do you want the truth?' I asked.

'Certainly.'

'Well, he said you were a good man at your work, but added that it was a pity that you were such a bumptious little beast! Sorry,' I went on, 'but you asked for the truth.'

'And I've got it,' he agreed, without any visible perturbation, 'according to the wisdom of Mr. Grice. Did he make any other remark of outstanding importance?'

I was annoyed at his sneering manner, but thought it best to ignore the same. 'Perhaps it will please you better to hear that he was at one with your diagnosis of foul play, and that he laid great stress on the urgency of following up the clue provided by Susan Swayne.'

'Did he?' he retorted. 'Well, I'm not surprised. But for the future, Mr. Blair, I should be grateful if you would kindly refrain from passing on to him any item of information which I may discover without first obtaining

my permission to do so. You can readily understand why I impose this condition; I should be lamentably hampered in the job that lies before me by any suchlike indiscretion on your part.'

'I may find it a bit awkward,' I replied, 'but, of course, under the circumstances, it can't be helped. Right, I'll give you my word—I won't say anything to Grice without first asking your leave. But, in return, I shall expect you to be quite open with me concerning his particular rôle in this confoundedly complicated show.'

'Thank you,' he said, 'I'm much obliged. Be sure that, as soon as I have any definite news to give you about Mr. Grice, or anybody else, you shall have it without delay. And now, I rather think I hear Mr. Sadde coming down the stairs. With your permission I'll waylay him in the hall; it's essential that I should get hold of him.'

'Surely he'll come in here,' I suggested, detaining my man. There was still another question I was anxious, and yet not anxious, to ask: 'You haven't told me the name of the second person whose movements you're having watched?'

I knew it, of course, before he answered, but, for all that I was prepared, it hit me very hard when it came.

'I'm sorry, Mr. Blair,' he said, with the first touch of genuine feeling in his voice that I had noticed during my two interviews with him. 'I'm sorry, but I can't possibly leave any avenue of information unexplored. All I can promise to do is to assure you that I shall personally undertake to carry out each and every investigation that may be necessary in the case of young Mr. Balbirny. More than that, for I will so far relax my usual rule as to let him know what I have been doing and what I propose to do. Will you be seeing him this evening?'

'I should think it's extremely likely. In any case, I can ring him up and ask him to come.'

'Well, I'd be glad if you would. I only want you to put one question to him and it is this: Why did he pay a visit to a Mrs. Sally Stingeron at her flat in Tinto Road at eleven-thirty last night? I'll call round early to-morrow morning to learn his answer and to see Miss Susan Swayne's

letter, which should have arrived by then. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll be off. I hear Father Sadde opening the front door.'

He was out of the room like a shot, and overtook his man—as I saw from the window, to which I had hastily hobbled—at the bottom of the steps. They indulged in an animated, and on Sadde's part, an irate conversation for at least a couple of minutes, but the altercation ended as Pittendriech had obviously determined it should end. No doubt he held the whip-hand, but it was excruciatingly funny to watch the pompous, self-important priest being propelled—willy-nilly, as the old phrase goes—across the pavement and into the waiting car at the hands of a dapper, wiry little man, half his size but possessed of a will of iron.

When the car drove off, I made my way somewhat wearily through the hall and into the library. There I lit my pipe, and settled down to glance through the morning papers in the few minutes left to me before lunch. I had just finished reading an appreciative and sympathetic account of Julian's career and misfortune in *The Caledonian* when Daphne came into the room. She had evidently just returned from an outing, and looked the personification of health and youth and beauty.

'How now, old thing?' she asked in her cheery way. 'What's the latest news from the seat of war?'

I let the paper drop on to the floor. 'It's not included in this edition,' I replied, 'but I'm in the unusual position of being able to forestall the next. Effie's going to marry Father Sadde.'

'Golly!' exclaimed Daphne. 'Gone in right off the deep end, has she? What a lark! Well, Dad,' she went on in a more sober strain, 'the news hasn't exactly thrown me on to my beam ends—whatever they may be—and I don't know that I'm not rather glad to hear it. He's a humbug, I think, but he has always had sense enough and patience enough to take her in the right way; which is more than can be said for you or Uncle Tom. He somehow manages to treat her as a child and yet allows her to retain her dignity—and that's exactly what she wants.'

'I daresay that's true. But,' I objected, 'how long

d'you suppose he'll keep it up after the wedding? She's the sort of woman who would try the patience of a saint, and Sadde's anything but that. At one moment she expects you to save her the trouble of making up what she is pleased to call her mind on the most trifling subjects and the next she's on her high horse because she considers that some perfectly plain statement you've made is disparaging to what she describes as her dignity. The woman can't have it both ways, you know.'

'Not with stern, hard-hearted, level-headed men of the world like her trustees, I know,' she laughed, 'who only frighten her into fits. But Father Sadde soothes her fears and respects her susceptibilities, and even at times succeeds in making her merry and bright. So, even if she does run a certain amount of risk in marrying him, I think you might do worse than hold your hands over them and signify your assent with a "Bless you, my children," or any other old phrase to that effect. I should like to be on the spot to see you doing it.'

'I daresay you would,' I retorted, 'though, I'm sorely afraid, purely for the fun of the thing.'

'Not altogether, sir,' said Daphne, with a most engaging smile. 'I really do think that Effie would be happier, and besides, you, and Uncle Tom could then—so to say—sleep quietly in your beds o' nights. At any rate, you wouldn't so often be irritated almost to a state of frenzy as you are just now.'

'Perhaps not,' I agreed, 'but all the same there are two sides to the question, and I intend to place the pros and cons very clearly before Effie this afternoon after lunch. Mind you, it was Sadde who gave me the news; I have still to receive confirmation of it from the second party in the case. If I know my Effie, she'll be in a greater state of indecision about the venture than he led me to believe. Why in the world she should spring this surprise on us at this juncture—when we don't know whether Julian is alive or dead—the Lord only knows!'

'She's probably thinking more about herself than Julian,' said my daughter, wisely though a little sadly as it seemed to me. 'But from something he said to me the other day—the last time I saw him it was—I don't

think he would raise any very strong objection to the arrangement.'

I pondered over this statement for a moment, wondering why he had taken such a view. Then : ' Mr. Sadde gave me to understand that Julian and his mother had not of late been on the best of terms,' I remarked.

Daphne was up in arms at once. ' I don't believe that,' she asserted vigorously. ' No doubt he must have been fed up to the back teeth over and over again, but he never hinted at such a thing to me. He was always loyal to her.'

' So I found,' I replied, and just then the gong sounded. ' Is Effie coming down to lunch ? ' I asked hastily.

' She told me she was, before I went out. But, perhaps, the recent clerical proposal has put her all in a flutter, and she may have changed her mind. I say, Dad, what are we to say to her if she does come down ? '

' Leave her to broach the subject herself. You'd better find out if she's equal to the occasion, and, oh, Daphne, ring up Nigel when he gets back to the office and ask him to dine here to-night '

' He'll be here all right ; I've already invited him. Thought he might cheer you up a bit, old man.' Daphne smiled back at me as she opened the door, and ran lightly upstairs.

Mrs. Scrimgeour descended to lunch, after delaying the meal for a quarter of an hour. As expected, her presence did not exactly add to the gaiety of the festive board, since she treated us to a sort of bewildering variety exhibition of the whole gamut of her emotions. She was querulous and skittish, mournful and bright, despondent and optimistic, in a series of turns which would have reflected credit upon an actress of parts. Fortunately she steered clear of the subjects of Julian and Sadde, and Daphne and I took jolly good care to steer clear of them, too. The brunt of keeping the conversation going fell on Daphne, who skilfully managed to interest our guest in the never-failing topic of dress. Knowing my limitations, I contributed little enough to the discussion, though I put in a tentative word or two now and then. Any way, I was glad when the meal was over in spite of the unpleasant ordeal which I knew lay waiting

for me. I meant to get through with it as speedily as I could, being sure that half the troubles in life come from that reprehensible and idiotic modern habit of shilly-shally, which is one of the greatest curses of civilization.

As soon then as lunch was finished, I told Mrs. Scrimgeour that it was imperatively necessary that I should have a talk with her, and in the end half-coaxed, half-frightened her into coming to the library with me.

But it is one thing bringing a horse, or a mare, as in this case, to the water, and another thing getting her to drink. Handicapped as I was by Pittendriech's instructions, I felt I was trying to play a part singularly uncongenial to myself and not too fair to the lady. In dealing with the question of Sadde's pretensions to her heart and hand, I was prohibited from telling her what I knew, or, rather, what the detective knew, about the man, and so was perforce compelled to base my objections to the match (which I saw no reason to conceal) on the loss of income which her marriage to him would inevitably entail.

To which she retorted that she was prepared to make any sacrifice on earth in order to throw herself into the arms of as godly and sympathetic a friend as 'dear Father Sadde' had always been to her. Could I wonder that she had been irresistibly drawn towards a man who had understood her peculiar needs from the first, and had persisted in offering her that perfect consideration which other people—she would name no names—had lamentably failed to show? Did I think she had been so utterly bereft of wits as not to have been conscious of that air of insufferably superior patronage—she would use no harsher term—with which they had discharged their obligations towards a woman in her forlorn state? Could I imagine that she would be so inconceivably foolish as to take my so-called disinterested advice at the most anguished moment of her life, when her only son had deserted her for some inexplicable reason of his own and she was floundering alone in a bog of doubts and fears? No, she was not to be influenced by any ungenerous criticism of a man whose transcendental qualities I was obviously incapable of appreciating, and whom I could in consequence only regard with the jaundiced eyes of jealousy. And so on,

and so forth *ad nauseam* the eternal whine of *la femme incomprise* ; or, as Hubert Brett afterwards explained, of a woman held in the relentless grip of her own inferiority complex.

It soon became perfectly plain to me that she had no suspicion of Sadde's real character. To every inquiry I made, she returned the same sort of answer—he was a model of all the virtues in the world. Doubtless I might have done better, had I approached my task in a different way ; had I, in fact, pretended to encourage the fellow's suit instead of pouring cold water on his aspirations. But in the light of all I had heard from Pittendriech, I could not bring myself to adopt such Machiavellian methods. At the same time, I felt I could not leave the matter where it was ; for her own sake it would never do to allow her to engage herself too deeply to a man of Sadde's unsavoury antecedents. So I decided to change my tune, and, in casting about for further arguments, came across one which I hoped might prove more successful.

'Look here, Effie,' I said, as she paused after the last of her hysterical outbursts, 'let us concede for the moment that Mr. Sadde is all you picture him to be, and that Tom Balbirny and I have in the past failed in the spirit, if not in the letter, of our obligations to you. As regards both these points, you will admit that we personally can reap no benefit whatever from any opinions we may hold or from actions we may feel called upon to take. That being so, let us consider the question from another point of view. Don't you think it might be wiser for you to wait until Julian returns before committing yourself to a policy of which he may possibly not approve ? I—I think you owe him some consideration.'

She looked up quickly, a curious expression of uneasiness and fear in her eyes. 'What consideration has he shown for me ?' she demanded peevishly.

No remark which she might have made could have shown me more clearly the appalling state of her mind than this. 'Do you really mean what you say ?' I asked indignantly—it was difficult to preserve a level tone. 'I would submit that he has never failed in affection or duty towards you all the days of his life.'

I spoke strongly, and I saw the look of uneasiness increase in her eyes. 'You—you don't know all,' she managed at last to stammer out.

'Maybe I don't,' I returned, 'and, indeed, I am only trusting to the evidence of my own eyes. Ever since Harry died I feel sure that Julian has given you such filial affection as rarely falls to a mother's lot these days. If you are referring to his unaccountable disappearance since early yesterday morning when you complain of his want of consideration, I can only suggest that, until we find ourselves in possession of some definite explanation of the mystery, we shall do well to refrain from any rash attempt to prejudge so extraordinary an event.'

She shivered a little, and the colour faded out of her face. 'Oh, Colin,' she cried, her lips quivering and her eyes filling up with moisture, 'don't be hard on me. I—I—nobody knows what Julian has been to me—the best and kindest of sons—till—till——'

She broke down utterly and dissolved into a flood of tears. Like most men, I am at a hopeless disadvantage in the presence of a weeping woman, even of a woman so feckless as Effie had always proved herself to be. I felt horribly uncomfortable, and, but for my confounded foot, would, I think, have left the room until the inundation had subsided. But an unpleasant suspicion had entered my thoughts, and I had to give it voice.

'Till Mr. S—er—till somebody began to poison your mind against him?' I completed her remark in question form, and waited patiently for her reply.

But she continued to sob, and I waited in vain for several minutes. At last, in self-defence, I returned once more to the attack. 'Come now, Effie,' I said, 'even if you can't believe I wish you well, you can't think I haven't Julian's best interests at heart. If you have anything to tell me about him which might help Mr. Pittendriech in his search for the boy, I beg you not to keep silence on the point.'

She dabbed at her eyes with a totally inadequate handkerchief—four square inches of flimsy cambric already ringing wet—and her sobs came to a curiously sudden stop—curious, that is, until her answer disclosed the apparent reason—my mention of the detective's name.

'Why did you call that man in?' she asked, with an added note of anger in her peevish tones. 'I can't bear the sight of him.'

'I don't like him myself,' I responded heartily. 'So there, you see, is something in common between us. But there's no denying the fact that he's exceptionally well-qualified for his job. What's your particular objection to the man?'

'I can't tell you exactly, but he reminds me of a carrion crow.'

I laughed. 'Yes, that's good,' I said, 'but you can't hold the fellow's personal appearance against him; even the "hoodie crow" has its good points. I think Pittendriech looks like a scraggy old vulture myself, but I should hesitate before condemning the man just because of that painful fact.'

'That's because you're only a man yourself,' said Mrs. Scrimgeour, with a feeble little effort at jocularity. 'Any woman would condemn him on his appearance alone. She would instinctively feel he was evil through and through.'

'Well,' said I, 'if fate ever lands me in the dock and you're on the jury, Effie, I shall instruct my advocate to object to your presence. Can't you give me some more tangible reason for your dislike?'

'Oh, he's just a hateful man.'

'Quite,' I commented, with a feeling of helplessness.

'Well, let's leave it at that. What does, Mr. Sadde think of him?'

'He thinks he's the most horrible person he's ever met.'

This reply surprised me as little as it will surprise my reader. 'Well,' I went on, 'what about Julian? Did he ever mention Pitten—er—Pittendriech to you?' The sentence was only half out of my mouth, when I realized my mistake, but I had presence of mind enough to finish it with a rush. Silently, but with zest and a certain grim humour, I cursed the unlucky chance which had entangled me in this web of subterfuge and mystery. It was obvious I was out of my element as a sleuth, and I fervently hoped that my companion had failed to catch my words.

She hadn't, of course; she was on to them like a streak of lightning.

'Julian?' she gasped, and again the look of fear appeared in her eyes. 'Julian?' she repeated, and I knew her tears were not far away. 'Can it be possible that he knew the man?'

I clutched hastily at this reprieve, for I had feared I might have had to answer a query more directly aimed. 'Why do you ask?' I enquired, as quickly as I knew how.

'Because'—she answered, in a quavering voice and she softly that I scarce heard her response—'because when Mr. Pittendriech was speaking to me yesterday, he h-hinted that he knew all about s-something that Julian—that I—that Jul——'

Here she burst into a regular storm of tears, which threatened eventually to become so uncontrollable that I was forced to go in search of Daphne and bring her to the rescue. I left her to minister to the unfortunate woman, and retreated without delay to the quiet seclusion of the dining-room. For a short time I felt so perturbed at the scene I had just witnessed that I hobbled up and down the carpet on my crutches, a prey to rather uncomfortable reflections. But gradually I came to the conclusion that my indiscretion could have done but very little harm. If, as I read the riddle, the detective had during his association with Julian obtained some slight inkling of a former peccadillo on the latter's part and had tried to obtain confirmation thereof from Mrs. Scrimgeour, he was perfectly justified in making the attempt. His theory would be—and I held his theory would be right—that it would be bad practice on his part not to follow up the most slender clue that might shed a little light on the obscurity in which he presently found himself. Doubtless, at his own time, he would take me into his confidence on the point. Till then I made up my mind to keep my mouth shut. And so far as Mrs. Scrimgeour was concerned I thought it extremely likely that she'd keep Pittendriech at arm's length; he would not learn from her that his name had been mentioned between us.

Whereupon I settled down in an arm-chair with a sigh of relief and lit another consolatory pipe.

CHAPTER X

JUST before dinner Nigel turned up in great good spirits and flourishing a copy of the latest edition of the evening paper, which he had purchased on the way: 'Seen this bit of news in the "stop press"? ' he exclaimed, and then proceeded to read the paragraph out aloud: 'The Missing International Player:—Our Liverpool correspondent wires that a man, whose appearance corresponded in all particulars with that of Mr. Julian Scrimgeour, was seen in the vicinity of the River Mersey this afternoon. He was travelling on the Overhead Railway, which runs along the line of docks, and left the train at the Pierhead Station. He was followed by the gentleman giving the information, who unfortunately only reached the level of the street in time to see his quarry jump into a waiting motor car, which immediately drove off. Luckily, however, the number of the car was taken, and the matter is now in the hands of the local police.' 'What price that for a smart bit of work, eh, souls?' he concluded with a grin.

Daphne snatched the paper out of his hands, saying she would take it up to Effie. That misguided woman, by the way, had retired to bed, apparently under the impression that it was a wiser policy to lie there and waste her energies nursing her grief rather than employ them in doing a bit of honest work. While Daphne was out of the room, Nigel and I discussed the paragraph from every point of view. I may at once say that it turned out to be a 'frost,' and have only inserted it here because it proved to be the precursor of a hundred other fictitious reports with which the papers were inundated as each day passed by.

Dinner, in the absence of Mrs. Scrimgeour, was a cheery meal. The presence of the waitress naturally precluded any intimate talk about Julian at table, so it wasn't until we had migrated in a body to the library that I was able to get back to the subject that was uppermost in our thoughts. From the first I had determined to keep nothing back from the two young people, partly because

they were as much concerned in the matter as I was myself, and partly because I valued their co-operation. I therefore began by giving them a complete account of the four conversations in which I had taken part during the day, omitting only for the moment any mention of the searching question which Pittendriech had asked me to put to Nigel. I felt it might be awkward for both of them if I carried out his instructions while Daphne was in the room; my opportunity would arrive when she departed for the purpose of attending to one or another of Mrs. Scrimgeour's numerous wants.

But to my increasing surprise and annoyance she showed no sign of departing—not even when I hinted that she was neglecting her guest. Moreover, a broader hint given ten minutes later on met with no greater success; in fact, it produced an effect entirely contrary to that which I had expected.

'Why this sudden tender show of affection for Effie?' she asked. 'Are you trying to get rid of me, my dear sir?'

'Why, yes,' I replied in my sternest tones. 'I should be rather relieved if you'd go. There's something I particularly wish to say to Nigel.'

'To me?' exclaimed that young man, sitting up and—as he would have put it—taking notice.

'Yes. Pittendriech wants you to answer a certain definite question regarding your movements last night.'

'And you think the answer might offend my maiden modesty—is that it?' inquired my daughter with the engaging frankness so characteristic of her controversial methods.

Before I had time to reply, Nigel cut in. 'Fire away, Uncle Colin,' he said. 'If Daphne wants to stay, I'm sure I don't mind.'

'On your own two heads be it, then,' I rejoined. 'Pittendriech wants to know what your object was in paying a visit to the flat of a Mrs. Sally Stingerson in Tinto Road at eleven-thirty last night?'

On hearing this, his brow lowered and an angry shade of resentment passed over his eyes. 'So he's had me under observation, has he? The dirty dog!'

Daphne wagged an admonitory forefinger in his

direction. 'Who is Mrs. Sally Stingerson?' she demanded. And as an afterthought: 'Is she by any chance a relative of Susan Swayne's?'

'There you have me,' retorted Nigel imperturbably. 'I haven't the foggiest notion of her family affairs.'

'Well, who is she, anyway, and what were you doing at her flat?' Daphne persisted in her demand.

'As far as I know, she is—or was—a fifth-rate actress of sorts,' he replied. 'And I went to see her on business of a particularly private kind.'

'Which means,' I interposed, 'that you don't intend to tell us anything about it?'

Nigel thought for a moment before he answered. Then, looking me straight in the eyes—'Which means that I don't intend to tell you anything about it,' he returned, 'if you like to put it that way.'

There was something in the look of the lad and in the tone of his voice that struck a deep chord of memory in me, and I suddenly found myself trying hard to recall on what far-away occasion I had once before seen the same expression on another man's face and heard him speaking identical words, or something very like them. But the attempt was frustrated for the time being by Daphne's next remark.

'Yes, my lad,' I became conscious she was saying, 'but suppose we put it another way. Suppose we said that we knew you'd tell us all about it, if you felt you were in a position to do so?' And she glanced at him with an expression that might have melted an iceberg.

Quite a good effort, old girl,' he grinned back, 'but it wouldn't make a ha'porth of difference.'

'Well, to get down to brass tacks,' she went on, 'suppose we said that we guessed that you were shielding somebody else?'

'Sorry,' he replied, without a moment's hesitation, 'but there'd still be nothing doing.'

With a little ripple of laughter, Daphne turned to me. 'My efforts have all "gone west,"' she bantered gaily. 'And yet, if he's told me once that he loves me, he's told me fifty times.'

There was more than a touch of the eternal feminine

in this, I thought, however ultra-modern my daughter considered herself to be. For a second or two Nigel was struck dumb by the subtle strength of the appeal, but he soon recovered himself. 'You take a lot of persuading,' he said, 'but Daphne, I'm a pig-headed sort, of cuss, and I'm sticking to my guns. In both ways,' he added, with a marked accent on the 'both.'

Daphne got up from her chair, and moved towards the door. 'If you hadn't,' she remarked, as he jumped up and held it open for her, 'you'd—you'd have "gone west," too—just as quick as that!' And she joyously snapped her fingers in his face.

Then she kissed her hand to both of us, and the next minute was out of the room and running up the stairs. For a while Nigel stood with his hand on the door knob, gazing after her long after she had disappeared from view. It did me good to see the light in his eyes, but a bit of a draught coming from the door made my foot feel cold and I recalled him from dreams to reality.

'Mix me a whisky and soda, old man,' I said, 'and have one yourself. I'm sure you'll understand,' I went on, as he busied himself with the Tantalus, 'that I as well as Daphne have no desire to drag anything out of you that you don't wish to tell. But I warn you that Pittendriech—for some reason best known to himself—is hot on your track, and he's not likely to have such implicit trust in you as—as your old friends appear to have. What you've done to excite his suspicions I don't know—and I don't want to know—but he's evidently got 'em, and got 'em pretty strong. He told me he was keeping an eye on you himself—why, I also don't know—except that he realizes that I am rather a pal of yours, and maybe he is trying to soften the blow for me when he's laid you by the heels.'

'Jolly decent of him,' said Nigel, handing me my drink and taking his stand in front of the fire. 'Well, let him find out what he can; after all, the beggar's got to do his work in his own way and according to his own lights, and we can't blame him. But, so far as "*l'affaire* Stingererson" is concerned, he'll get no assistance from me.'

'No. But he'll get at the woman and, metaphorically, wring her neck if she don't speak out.'

Nigel laughed. 'When Greek meets Greek,' he quoted, 'there's usually the devil to pay. Maybe he'll find he's bitten off a tougher and more gristly chunk of beef than his mouldy old molars can manage to chew.'

'She's a bit of a warrior, then?'

'From what little I saw of her I should say she'd have been exceptionally well fitted for a high command in old King What's-his-name's Amazonian Guard.' He chuckled at the notion. 'I should love to see a scrap between her and Pittendriech.'

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him whether his visit to this virago had had anything to do with Julian, or, as another thought flashed through my mind, whether it was to her house that Julian and he had gone on Saturday night. But knowing beforehand what answer I might expect, I refrained, and fell instead to asking him how he was flourishing at his stockbroking job.

'Had a bit of luck this morning,' he replied. 'Tipped a winner, and added another fifty a year to my depleted income by going bang against the guv'nor's fatherly advice. Brings me another step near Daphne—thank God! Not that she cares much for the dough,' he hastened to add, 'but I do—for her sake.'

Having said this, he sat down and talked about her till after eleven o'clock, when, with a healthy sigh and a muttered 'She doesn't seem to be coming down again,' he said good-night and quietly took his leave.

That night I lay longer awake in bed than usual, visualizing before my closed eyelids the scene which Nigel's look and voice had brought to life from among the buried memories of the past. And I saw very clearly a picture of three boys, clad in footer togs and standing in a little group together underneath the goal posts at the northern end of the big-side field at school. There was Harry Scrimgeour, his dark, saturnine features all suffused with the dull red tint of anger, glaring with blazing eyes at Tom Balbirny; there was Tom Balbirny, his colour a shade paler than was usual, meeting Harry's infuriated accusations with a dour, almost contemptuous expression

of disdain ; there was Colin Blair, excited but desperately anxious, regarding his two great chums with a look on his face which must have plainly indicated the emotions that were racing through his mind.

Funny, I thought, as the scene came back, how completely the whole incident had faded from my memory. For here was I lying quietly in my bed and calling to mind every little detail of the actual quarrel as vividly as if it had happened a day ago and not thirty-six years before. In particular, I remembered the acutely distressful feeling I had that the bottom was falling out of my pleasant little world.

Harry had bluntly accused Tom of stealing half a sovereign from the pocket of a pair of trousers he had left hanging in the dormitory, and, from the evidence he produced, with apparent justification. Tom had indignantly repudiated any knowledge of the theft, and had roundly cursed Harry for daring to make the accusation. And they had gone at it hammer-and-tongs until Tom had put an end to the squabble by declaring that he had no intention of saying another word and by strolling quietly away with his head in the air and his hands thrust deeply into his pockets. The incident had occurred towards the end of the Easter term, and relations between the three allies had been woefully strained while the two weeks which remained before the holidays began slowly dragged themselves along.

But during the holidays Harry had received a postal order for ten shillings, enclosed in a letter from an anonymous writer, who begged him to believe that Tom Balbirny was absolutely guiltless of the crime of which he had been accused. And so the trouble had ended, and the renewed friendship so strongly re-cemented that it had endured with never another break till Scrimgeour's death. But I also remembered that I had had a profound impression at the time that Tom had been aware of the identity of the actual thief, and for some fantastic reason of his own had decided to shield this boy. Well, I thought, like father, like son ; it struck me very forcibly that history was about to repeat itself at the present juncture in no uncertain

manner but with the unfortunate possibility of far more disastrous results.

(By the way, I spoke to Tom Balbirny two days ago about all this, and asked him if my impression had been correct and, if so, whose reputation he had saved? 'Did I save somebody's reputation?' he replied, looking vacantly at the ceiling. 'I've a vague recollection of suspecting—what the deuce was the fellow's name—chap with a long nose and flapping ears—you know—but I may have been all wrong.')

The next morning saw me down in time for breakfast and eagerly scanning the letters near my plate. There was a goodly pile of them, mostly, as I afterwards found, dealing in some way or other with Julian's escapade. But I had eyes only for one. It had been registered, and bore the Notting Hill Gate postmark of the previous day. I slit the envelope open, and quickly extracted the two letters I print in full below.

The first—a type-written document—was from Susan Swayne to me. It ran as follows:

' 114, Plevna Road,
Notting Hill Gate, W.
March 23rd.

' C. Y. B. Blair, Esq., W.S.,
7, Finmount Crescent,
Edinburgh.

' DEAR SIR,

' I beg to confirm telegram despatched to you from the Notting Hill Gate Post Office at 10.10 a.m. to-day:—

"Just seen newspaper account Julian Scrimgeour disappearance. Acting his letter instructions, sent telegram Sunday morning. Forwarding letter registered post. Writing—Susan Swayne."

' In reference to this, the enclosed letter, which reached me by the last post on Saturday, will go far to explain my actions.

' I may further mention, however, that I have known Mr. Scrimgeour for the last two years, and that during that time I have frequently corresponded with him on

many matters connected with our common profession of journalism.

'At the same time I should like to state that, though I carried out his behest as directed, I was—and still am—at a loss to account for its strange character.

'The only possible explanation I feel able to suggest is that in the course of certain investigations which I know he had recently been pursuing into the methods now used by the modern scientific criminal, he may have incurred the enmity of one or other of the gentlemen in question, and in consequence has found it convenient to escape their attentions by a ruse which, incidentally, would seem to have driven him to the necessity of deceiving his own people as well.

'I frankly admit that this suggestion of mine is founded on the wildest assumption, but it is given for what it is worth. Indeed, it is difficult to account for the instructions contained in his letter on any other ground.

'If I can be of any further service to you in the matter, pray do not hesitate to ask. I trust, however, that your anxiety may soon be laid to rest by Mr. Scrimgeour's reappearance within the next few days.

'Yours faithfully,

'SUSAN SWAYNE.'

The second—a half-sheet of note-paper, on which Julian had scribbled a few lines in his neat handwriting—was to Miss Swayne from him. Here is its text :

'8, Finmount Crescent,
Edinburgh,
20th March.

'MY DEAR SUSAN SWAYNE,

'"Them that asks no questions isn't told no lies." May I beg of you to take a taxi on Sunday morning to the G.P.O., and as soon as possible after 8 a.m. despatch the following telegram to my mother at the above address :—

'"Unexpectedly called away on urgent business. Will be away for a few days. Writing—Julian."

'My request must seem utterly incomprehensible to you,

I know, but I'll explain everything when we meet. Meanwhile, I can only assure you that I would not ask you to do this favour for me unless it were urgently necessary. Nor would I have bothered you, had it not been that nobody here knows of our acquaintance, and so there is the less likelihood of my missive to you being traced. I enclose a £1 Treasury note for all expenses. A hundred apologies for the trouble I am giving, but please do not fail to do what I ask. *And burn this note.*

'Yours ever,

' JULIAN SCRIMGEOUR.

' PS.—I can easily reach London on Sunday morning by the train leaving Waverley at 10.50 p.m. Thank heaven the International will then be over. Bet you a bob we win the match! J.S.'

I handed both letters over to Daphne without comment, and proceeded to tackle my plate of porridge. Neither of them—at any rate at first sight—appeared to cast the slightest light on the obscure problems we were up against. Indeed, if anything, they seemed to wrap it up still further in the haze of an impenetrable fog. It looked, on the face of it, as if Susan Swayne was a perfectly innocent agent, and also as if her assumption—wild as it might sound—had in it a possible germ of truth. I could only hope that what was inexplicable to me might prove clearer to the keener insight and greater experience of Christie Pittendrieck.

I had finished my porridge and had helped myself to devilled kidneys before Daphne spoke. She had read the letters through carefully twice, and was still examining them with a puzzled frown on her brow.

'I suppose,' she remarked at last, 'that this letter of Julian's is genuine.'

'It never occurred to me to doubt its authenticity,' was my reply, 'at least as far as the handwriting is concerned, if that is what you mean.'

'Well, not altogether that,' she went on musingly. 'I think I could swear to the handwriting, but the whole style of the letter is unlike Julian's usual polished productions.'

'You forget the state he must have been in when he wrote it,' I said. 'You could hardly expect a fellow in his unsettled condition to worry about the niceties of composition. Of course, the whole thing may simply be a "blind" to put everybody off the real scent, but surely there can be but little doubt that Julian actually wrote the note.'

'Perhaps you're right, Dad,' she replied, though the tone in which she spoke was rather unconvincing. 'It's the postscript that bothers me. Julian was always a bit finical in his ways, and one of his pet little literary idiosyncrasies was an abhorrence of postscripts in any shape or form. I believe he'd rather have written a letter all over again than have used one himself.'

'Your argument doesn't impress me, old girl,' I rejoined — 'for the reason I've already put forward.'

'Yes, but this particular P.S. is quite uncalled for. Why does he say that he can easily reach London on Sunday morning, after asking Susan Swayne to send off a wire for him from the G.P.O.? Couldn't he have sent it off himself in that case? And who ever heard of Julian betting a humble bob?'

'You don't know anything of the social circumstances of the lady,' I laughed back. 'She may not be possessed of a bean, and certainly might not have cared to have lost more. As to your first point, I'm as much in the dark as you are; I can only imagine that Julian intended to take the 10.50 train, but may have feared that he would miss it or be unable to carry out his intention for some other reason. It seems obvious that the despatch of the telegram must have been essential for the success of his scheme—whatever his scheme may have been—and he took the precaution of arranging with the Swayne woman to send it off, and so made certain that the job would be done.'

'Humph!' said my daughter, and with that expressive syllable the conversation came to an end. Nevertheless, I thought there might be something in what she had suggested, and I made a mental note to the effect that I would place her views before Pittendrieck when he turned up.

But before he arrived and while I was answering a few necessary letters in the library after breakfast, the waitress came in and asked me if I would interview a Miss Grizel Lobban who had just called at the house and was urgently anxious to see me.

'Who is she?' I asked impatiently, for I had suffered much in my time from touts of either sex. 'Did you inquire what her business was?'

'No, sir.' This is an ironic tone indicative of pained surprise that I should even have suspected her of taking such a liberty.

'Well, please do.'

On her return she announced that Miss Lobban desired to lay before me certain information which she thought might be of some help in the matter of Mr. Scrimgeour.

'Ah, that makes a difference,' I smiled. 'Kindly show her in.'

The young woman who presently entered the room was dressed as a nursemaid, and possessed of an overwhelming Scots accent and a pair of keen but kindly grey eyes. I bade her sit down and told her how glad I should be to listen to anything she had to say.

'Weel, sir,' she began, 'I had better start by telling you that I am in sairvice wi' Mistress MacBrair—her that lives at 25, Rattray Terrace—just five doors roond the corner frae Finmount Crescent ganging west. I'm nurse to her twa bairns, ye ken, and by reason o' the fac' that they're baith o' them doon wi' the measles I've no been sleeping gey weel. They were unco' onrestfu' a' Saturday night, forbye I'd a bit of a sair heid masel', and I thocht I'd tak' a wee keek oot o' the window. That would be aboot three o'clock on the Sabbath morn. Weel, it was awfu' dark and raining hard, but that didna prevent me hearing the engine o' a motor caur purr-purring saftly like and no vera far awa. Noo, I thocht at first it was the doctor's caur—ye see, I ken't he'd be needed soon by Mistress Livingstone at Number Nineteen—here she favoured me with a wink which was more eloquent than any spoken word could have been—but I just couldna understand why he'd be needing to keep his engine rinning. He's no a man to waste his petrol in yon silly way.'

'What's the doctor's name?' I asked, more from idle amusement than from any other cause.

'It's a queer English kind o' a name,' she answered. 'Dr. Barnaby Fagan.'

'What?' I exclaimed so sharply that she uttered a little squawk of alarm. 'Are you sure of that?'

'Aye,' she replied, looking keenly at me, 'certain sure. He's a vera clever chiel—I'm on his panel masel'. Maybe ye've heard tell o' him?'

'Yes,' I said hurriedly, 'I know his name quite well. But go on; tell me what happened next.'

'Weel, I was just thinking o' getting back to ma bed when I heard footsteps coming along the pavement frae the direction o' Finmount Crescent, and, thinks I, I'll bide a wee while langer whaur I am. Ye ken there's a lamp-post just in front o' Number Twenty-five wi' a braw bricht licht aye burning in it. And noo, I says to masel', here's a fine chance to find oot whether a' they say about young Mr. Skinner o' Number Twelve is true or no.'

'And what do they say about young Mr. Skinner?' I asked with a smile, for I personally knew the man in question to be a very decent fellow indeed.

'That he's ower fond o' the bottle,' Miss Lobban replied in rather a hushed tone of voice.

'Well, you can contradict the report,' I said, 'for it's quite unfounded. Whoever you saw, I'm sure it wasn't young Mr. Skinner.'

'You're richt, sir; it wasna him. It was no less than three men, and the twa billies on the outside were kind o' hurling the laddie in the middle along the street. I couldna exactly say whether he was blind fou or just terrible sick-like, but he wasna able to stand on his ain feet.'

'What was he like? Did you get a sight of his face?' I asked eagerly.

'Nae mair than a glint o't. I mind his heid fell back on his shouthers just a he was passing under the licht frae the lamp; it fair scunnered me to see his face.' And a look of horror passed over her own.

'Would you know it again? See—there's a photograph on the mantelpiece—'—I pointed to one of Julian which had been recently taken—'and I'd like you to look at it very

carefully. Do you mind getting it for yourself, as I'm tied to this wretched chair ?'

She took the photograph down, and examined it for fully half a minute. Then she replaced it, and turned to me. 'There's a bit o' a likeness between the face o' the man in the photie and the face o' the man I saw under the lamp. But I couldna exactly swear it was the same face. A face changes like, when a man's near deid.'

'Was he as bad as that ?'

'Aye, was he ! his een closed and his face as white as snaw.'

'Then, why the dev--er--why on earth did you not come and tell me all this before ?'

She gave another little squawk, but had her answer pat. 'Because I didna ken onything aboot ye till this vera morn, and because I thocht the matter was in the hands o' the polis.'

'In the hands of the police ? Then, why didn't you let them know what you'd seen ?'

'Because I a'ready thocht they ken't a' aboot it. Ye see, ane o' the twa lads I was telling you aboot was a polis-man himsel'.'

'The deuce he was ! Would you recognize him again ?'

'I didna see his face at a', but he was a fine, stoot man. The ither yin wasna onything like as big.'

'Did you see his face ?'

'Na, I didna hae the chance. They was by the lamp in a flash, and the next thing I kent was that they had stoppit close to the caur. I heard them pitting the puir laddie inside, and then awa' they went doon the street as if the muckle de'il himsel' were efter them. I doot they maun hae been exceeding the speed leemit.'

The lassie was priceless. There was a pawky humour and a keen curiosity about her which, together with considerable powers of observation and a shrewd common sense, made her singularly typical of her country and her race. That she was hugely enjoying the sensation she had created I could as little doubt as I could fail to perceive the extreme importance of the evidence she brought. If, as seemed only too likely, Julian had been the central figure in that little group of three, then all theories regarding

the cause of his mysterious disappearance with the exception of that one which suggested the possibility of foul play vanished at once into thin air. I made up my mind to get in touch with Pittendriech without a moment's delay, for, thanks to Miss Lobban's unfortunate but—as I had in fairness to admit excusable procrastination, we had lost the most valuable time. I was just on the point of getting out of my chair for the purpose of ringing him up, when she spoke again.

'I doot I should hae come a wee bit suner,' she said apologetically, 'but it wasna till this morning that I tell't what I had seen on Saturday nicht to Mistress MacBair. She had been reading bits oot o' the papers to the twa laddies, and they was terrible ta'en up wi' Mr. Scrimgeour's case. As sune as she had heard ma story, she was a' for me ganging straight to you. "Pit on yer hat, Grizel," she said, "and rin roond to Mr. Blair's." I minded to change ma claes first though, because o' the measles; I dinna think ye need be feared o' the risk o' ony infection.'

'I'm no feared,' I laughed back, mimicking her 'braid Scots.' 'And I'm exceedingly grateful to you for the information you've brought. Will you be able to stay a little bit longer while I ring up Mr. Pittendriech—the great detective, you know? He's in charge of the case, and I feel certain he would like to hear your tale from you own lips.'

'Him?' she exclaimed, and there was almost a note of awe in her voice. 'Eh, but I'd like fine to hae a bit crack wi' him! No but what he isna a thrawn deevil wha—from what I hae heard o' him—can bite waur nor he can bark. But I doot I'll need to be getting back to the bairns.'

'Oh, you can surely wait a bit longer; they're in good hands. I'll ring him up now.'

But I was spared the trouble of doing so, for, just as my hand was on the instrument, the library door was opened by the waitress and the man himself was shown in.

CHAPTER XI

I INTRODUCED Miss Lobban to Christie Pittendriech, who, after listening to her story, promptly submitted her to such a searching cross-examination as might well have flustered a less doughty and self-dependent character. But her evidence was not to be shaken on any one point, and the only further item of information elicited from her by the detective was to the effect that the smaller of the two men, who had presumably been engaged on the criminal task of abducting Julian, might possibly have been wearing a moustache. Pressed more than once on the question of the taller man having been in police uniform—a detail which appeared to puzzle Pittendriech as much as it had puzzled me—she refused to budge one inch from the standpoint of her original statement, and declared that she was ready to take her dying oath on the fact. I must say that I admired her attitude immensely; there could be no doubt as to the strength of her conviction. We discovered that she had only been in Edinburgh for six weeks, and that she came from a little clachan in Banffshire situated about five miles inland from the south coast of the Moray Firth.

Pittendriech, as was plain to see, was extraordinarily impressed by the sturdy independence of her character, and even relaxed so far from his habitual non-committal methods as to pay her a compliment before she left. 'There's stuff in you, Miss Lobban,' said he, as he shook hands, 'that would appear to be wasted on your present occupation. Anybody with a kindly heart can nurse a couple of bairns with the measles, but you are capable of something better than that. When you feel inclined to aim a bit higher, come to me and I'll see what I can do to help.'

I was amused at the effect this unexpected but appreciative tribute had on the girl. For once, she, who had hitherto never been at a loss for an apt and forcible reply to any one of Pittendriech's blunt and uncompromising questions, was literally struck dumb with gratitude and surprise.

'They breed a remarkable race in the north-eastern corner of Scotland,' he said, smiling his twisted smile, after she had gone. 'I should have liked to have seen her up against one of the old hanging judges—Braxfield, for choice—for she'd have met with his approval as much as she's met with mine. Well, Mr. Blair, I don't need to tell you that her evidence goes far to strengthen the evidence that Scrimgeour has been the victim of foul play, and I wish to God we had had it earlier. If you'll excuse me for a moment and allow me to use your telephone, I'll get on to the police and find out the name of the constable who was on duty on this particular beat on Sunday morning. It's not likely he can give us any information, but we can get a report on his general capabilities and trustworthiness.'

I gave my consent at once, and in due time he obtained the information he required. It was to the effect that P.C. Macmurdo was a thoroughly reliable and efficient officer who was held in considerable respect by his superiors in rank. It was added that in his report of the night in question no reference had been made to any suspicious occurrence whatsoever. I may here take the opportunity of supplementing this bare summary by saying that at an interview which I had with Macmurdo later on in the day he told me he had passed along Finmount Crescent to the westward about 2.45 a.m., and then along Rattray Terrace without seeing any car and without meeting anybody but one young man. This gentleman, he said, was hurriedly walking eastward, and they had almost collided with one another at the spot where Finmount Crescent unites with Cromdale Place. They had exchanged an amused and pleasant 'good-night,' but, beyond that, not another word had been spoken. That this was Nigel Balbirny was confirmed by Nigel himself, who, when asked if he had met anyone on his way home after his vigil outside Julian's house, corroborated Macmurdo's account in every particular.

As soon as Pittendriech had finished his conversation with the superintendent in charge of the district police office, I handed him the two letters I had received, and drew his attention to Daphne's criticism of Julian's note to Susan Swayne. In answer to that, he said that he had

only had one or two hastily-scribbled notes from Julian all the time he had known him, and that, while there had certainly been no postscript in any of them, it seemed rather absurd to deduce from that fact that Scrimgeour had never made use of one—especially if he had been in such a desperate hurry, as he obviously had been, when the letter was penned. He added that he could swear to the genuineness of Julian's handwriting, but very strongly recommended that the matter should be referred to an expert in caligraphy.

This, I agreed, should be done at once, and done accordingly it was that very day, although, owing to the destruction of all his documents and papers, we had the greatest difficulty in discovering a recent sample of Julian's writing with which his note to Susan Swayne could be compared. His mother possessed nothing written more recently than two years ago, and neither the Balbirnys nor Daphne and I had anything at all. Fortunately Dr. Craigie had kept—or, rather, had failed to destroy—a postcard which Julian had written to him in connexion with the Irish match, and the expert in caligraphy, while pointing out that he had been considerably handicapped by the paucity of material with which he had had to deal, was decidedly of the opinion that both missives had been written by the same hand. With regard to the actual contents of the letter to Susan Swayne, Pittendriech said that he could only come to the same decision which I had reached myself: namely that the whole thing was a 'blind' which had possibly been engineered in accordance with Miss Swayne's suggestion, but a 'blind' which had failed to come off. Which, as he pointed out, was further proof—if further proof were needed—of the state of mental instability in which Julian must have been.

When he came to discuss Susan Swayne's letter to me, he continued to lay stress on this point. 'I thought I knew Scrimgeour pretty well,' he said, with a frown of annoyance, 'but I'm beginning to realize my mistake. By the way,' he broke off, 'that reminds me that I've been carrying the little agreement which he and I signed in connexion with the book we were going to write about with me in case you would care to see it. Here it is'—

and he extracted a document from his pocket, and handed it to me.

I glanced through it, noted the three signatures at the bottom of the page, and carefully read the terms of the contract. They were quite simple and in accordance with Pittendriech's description. The main three points were that the book should be published as Scrimgeour's work, that any profits that might be earned should be equally divided between him and Christie Pittendriech, and that without the express permission of the latter no mention of his participation in the undertaking should be made.

I handed the paper back with the sole and rather sad comment that I entirely failed to understand Julian's conduct.

'So do I, Mr. Blair,' said Pittendriech. 'It must mean that either he has been suffering from some slowly-progressive mental malady for a longer period than we think or that he is far "deeper" in character—to put it mildly—than any of us could possibly have suspected. Take this letter of Miss Swayne's—well, while it doesn't actually mention my name, it leaves me in some doubt as to whether he may not have told her all about me. From what she says I should take it that he was even on more intimate terms with her than he was with me, for he never so much as hinted to me that he considered himself to be in any sort of danger at all. Now, I don't think that Miss Swayne would have advanced the supposition that he was taking all these elaborate precautions to escape from some perilous position unless he had said something to put the idea into her head. That's what beats me; why tell her and neglect to tell me when we were so closely associated together over the book?'

'I can't imagine the reason, unless he and Miss Swayne were more to one another than we have conjectured. She's a woman, you know.'

'Yes, I know. But, on the other hand, if there is one thing you and his mother and Mr. Balbirny are certain about, it's his infatuation for Miss Blair.'

'True,' I replied. 'But that doesn't entirely rule the other woman out, does it? Can't you tell me something about her? Who is she? What's she like? Hasn't

your fellow in London—I've forgotten his name—given you a detail or two about her ? '

'Hudson ? Yes, he 'phoned through late last night. He'd had a long interview with the lady between nine and ten o'clock. She's about thirty years old, a spinster with a little money of her own, who rents a flat in Plevna Road along with a friend called Lettice Colfax and adds considerably to her private means by free-lance journalism. She specializes in sporting news, with crime as an important side-line. She's a tall, good-looking brunette, possessed of intelligence, vivacity, and charming manners. She first met Scrimgeour about three years ago at her brother's house. You'll know his name—Jim Swayne, who played forward for England and was one of their best men. At this meeting they discovered a community of tastes, and apparently have had a sort of mutual understanding ever since that each might call upon the other for assistance in their professional work. They didn't see one another very often, but a good deal of correspondence passed between the two. She told Hudson that for the last four months she had written to Scrimgeour on an average once a week, informing him of any bit of out-of-the-way knowledge she had thought might be of use to him for his forthcoming book. In return, he had given her much inside information, especially as regarded Rugby football, which had been of the utmost service to her in connexion with a weekly article she contributed to *Amateur Sport*. Now, Mr. Blair, all this seems quite natural and above-board, but what beats me is that Scrimgeour should never so much as have mentioned the woman's name to me.'

'A curious omission, I admit. Had she anything particular to say about his last letter to her ? '

'Nothing, except that its contents were so unexpected that she got a bit of a shock. In fact, she was in two minds as to whether she ought to have sent the telegram. She told Hudson that she would not have done so had she been convinced that Scrimgeour must really have been in some perilous position.'

'Then, I take it, Hudson and you are both more or less satisfied that Miss Swayne acted her part simply as an innocent agent of Scrimgeour's ? '

'On the surface, it's the only explanation that appeals to me. I asked Hudson whether the lady showed any marked symptoms of distress when she was talking of Scrimgeour's disappearance, and he assured me she did not. Any way, for the moment we need not bother about her any further. Grizel Lobban's evidence, if true—and I've no reason to discredit it—has narrowed down the scope of our enquiries in the most satisfactory way.'

'Lucky for us the MacBrair boys having measles, eh?' I laughed. 'Otherwise Grizel would have been sleeping the sleep of the just and not keeking out of the night-nursery window.'

'Lucky indeed. Now, in the light of this new information, where do we stand? If you'll give me your attention for a moment, Mr. Blair, I'll sum up the situation as I now see it myself and as shortly as I can. Just before three o'clock on Sunday morning Mr. Balbirny abandons his self-imposed vigil, and goes straight to his rooms. Which means that he walks in an easterly direction. About three o'clock—or, at any rate, very soon afterwards—Grizel Lobban sees two men, one of whom is a policeman, dragging a third, whom she takes to be Scrimgeour, past her house in Rattray Terrace, and hears him placed in a waiting car and hurriedly driven off. P.C. Macmurdo reports that while on duty he has seen no suspicious occurrence whatsoever. Now, I don't as yet know at what time Macmurdo passed along Finmount Crescent and Rattray Terrace, but I'm inclined to hazard a guess that he did so only a few minutes before all this happened.'

How accurate his supposition turned out to be the reader already knows.

'Now,' he went on, 'you'll be wondering why I say that. Well, my reason is that I am sure we are dealing with a couple of crooks who not only devised a particularly cute plan for abducting Scrimgeour, but carried it out with an amazing intrepidity which commands my complete admiration. How they did it I don't as yet profess to know, but I'm open to give you odds of not less than a hundred to one that they—or at any rate one, though, more probably, both—were already in Scrimgeour's house when he returned home. I imagine they may have

completed the destruction of his papers by the time he arrived ; he may, indeed, have caught them in the act, and by so doing have unconsciously sealed his own fate, since, if my diagnosis of their characters is sound, they would stick at nothing to save their own skins. Probably they knocked him senseless, or doped him in some way or other. I think he must have fallen an easy victim, if Mr. Balbirny's description of his state of mind goes for anything.'

'But, good God !' I exclaimed, 'if your assumption is right, there's little enough hope left of the poor fellow still being alive.'

'Very little indeed,' he replied gravely. 'At the very best his life must be hanging on a thread. But let me finish my reconstruction of the sequence of events that Sunday morning. It's pure supposition, I know, but it fits the facts of the case. Whoever the men may turn out to be, they had to face the immediate problem of ridding themselves of Scrimgeour. Doubtless, they had the car in readiness somewhere in the vicinity ; possibly it may have been seen by Macmurdo, but that we don't yet know. Doubtless, too, they had arranged to remove Scrimgeour from his house immediately after the constable had passed by and was safely out of the way. But they can't have reckoned with Mr. Balbirny's watch outside, and I don't envy them their sensations as long as he was there. If they are the thorough-paced scoundrels I believe them to be, I fancy that if he had stayed much longer he might easily enough have shared his friend's fate.'

'Good Lord ! yes. I never thought of that.'

'Nor had I, until I heard the Lobban story just now. That made me set about reconstructing a good many of my preconceived ideas. Well, to go on, I imagine that, as soon as Mr. Balbirny had cleared off, one of the men slipped out and brought the car as conveniently near to Scrimgeour's house as was consistent with safety. He throttled her down so as to keep the engine running as quietly as possible, and then returned next door and helped his partner to haul their unfortunate victim along. Once they had him safely in the car, they could whisk him off to—God alone knows where. But that's what we've got to find out.'

'Well, Mr. Pittendriech,' I interposed, 'the scope of your inquiry may have been narrowed down, as you say, but I'm hanged if I think your job's any the easier.'

'I wouldn't like to say that. It's just possible we may be able to trace the movements of the car. You never know that someone may not have spotted a car "hare-ing" along country lanes at unlikely hours of the night. No, I'm feeling distinctly happier since my interview with Miss Lobban; but I should be happier still if only I could even guess at the identity of two men who must have had bitter cause to hate or fear Scrimgeour so fiercely as to drive them to plot his destruction.'

'That's what is such a formidable puzzle to me. Why, the last time I saw Julian I couldn't honestly say I noticed anything abnormal about him—nothing, I mean, that suggested to me for a moment that he was going about in peril of his life. What on earth could the man have been doing to get himself into such a terrible fix?'

'He might have been doing a hundred and one things—anything, in fact, that is conceivably possible. For instance, the suggestion Miss Swayne makes may be right; he may have done something to excite the enmity of the criminal fraternity in whose doings he was so interested; he may in an unguarded moment, for all I know, have been so unutterably foolish as to let one of these men into the secret about the book he meant to publish.'

'D'you mean to tell me he was personally acquainted with people of the kind?'

'Oh, yes. I should imagine he knew quite a lot of them. His idea was that the subject matter of the book would gain immensely in value if he could so far gain their confidence as to induce them to discuss all sorts of questions with him. I didn't agree with him; I remember I used to tell him I knew them so well that I wouldn't believe a word that any of them might speak. Nor would I have trusted them with my person for a single moment. Why, sir, I could lay my fingers on six unconvicted murderers just now, though it wouldn't do any good if I did. His invariable answer to my objections was to the effect that, seeing as how I'd been the means of bringing stacks of them to justice, he wasn't surprised at the attitude I'd

taken up. And so he argued that his case was entirely different—they'd no personal grudge against him. I said they'd a personal grudge against the whole world. Moreover, I insisted that they lived in such an atmosphere of fear—all of them, that is, who were not at the top of the tree in their profession—that the moment the slightest suspicion of his motives entered their heads he would find himself in a tight corner. At the back of my mind I feel that this was one of the reasons why I did not wish it to become known to anyone that I had had any hand in the preparation of the book. I don't go out of my way to irritate a crook; there's half a dozen of him only waiting the chance of sticking a knife into my back.'

'You've a fairly extensive acquaintance among them—at least so I gather. Do you suspect any particular one of them of being concerned in this crime?'

'No, not one man more than another. As a matter of fact, I have already been in touch with every single crook in this city who might, from my previous knowledge of him, have carried out—or been bribed to carry out—Sunday morning's *coup*. But one and all have proved that they were somewhere else—mostly in their beds—at the time. No, my private opinion is that the man or the men who brought it off so skilfully—the fact that one of them was disguised as a policeman was a brilliant touch—must be sought for in quite a different rank of society.'

'Well, what's your first step?'

'My first step is to get permission from you to offer a reward to anyone who will come forward with evidence likely to assist in the detection of these men. I should like to publish Miss Lobban's story—without mentioning names of course—in an early edition of the evening papers with a view to losing no further time.'

'Right. How much shall we offer? £500?'

'No, that's far too much. A hundred will do for a start.'

'Very well; make it a hundred. Anything else?'

'Yes. Did you get any information out of Mr. Balbirny about his visit to Mrs. Stingeron?'

'Not a word. All he would say was that his business with her had been of a particularly private nature.'

'So it had, Mr. Blair. I've found that out already.'

'You've seen her? Balbirny, I gathered, would like to have been present at the interview. He gave me to understand that the lady was a bit of a warrior.'

An amused grunt came from the detective. 'The description's rather flattering,' he said. 'I've met one or two foul-mouthed and filthy-minded individuals in the course of my career, but for sheer, unadulterated unwholesomeness of mind and body and soul commend me to Mrs. Sally Stingerson. I'd never met the woman before, though I was aware of her existence. Oh, good-looking enough, I grant you, so far as outward appearances go—tall, of rather full figure, and endowed with handsome features and a perfect complexion that many a girl might well covet for herself! A seductive Circe, if ever there was one on this earth, and you could gauge her profession a mile away. But this prepossessing exterior is just the thin veneer that covers a nature warped and twisted, revengeful and inconceivably depraved. You won't accuse me of having much sentiment in my composition, Mr. Blair, but even I felt shocked when I discovered in the course of my visit that there was a child—a girl of four or five—who called this harpy "Mother."'

I regarded Pittendriech with some astonishment. Not only was I surprised to hear so humane a comment from such lips as his, but all through this—my third—interview with him I had been struck by the fact that his general demeanour had been curiously different from that which he had exhibited on the two former occasions. I remember wondering what it might have been that had brought about so marked a change in his manner, and had casually come to the conclusion that it was due to a realization on his part that his truculent methods were proving more of a disservice to him than anything else in his association with me. I was to receive a truer explanation before he left the room.

Meanwhile: 'Poor wee lassie,' I said, 'it's a deplorable start in life for her. But what has she to do with the case?'

He stuck his chin out in my direction, and the action in some subtle way helped slightly to dispel the rather more

favourable impression he had recently made on me. 'That's just what I'm wondering, Mr. Blair,' he replied.

'But you surely don't think——?' I began.

'I think a lot, but I know nothing for certain,' he interrupted. 'Listen, Mr. Blair; I'll tell you the little I managed to squeeze out of the woman, and you can put your own construction on it. But before I start, I wish you to grasp the situation in which I found myself during my interview with her last night. I wish you to understand that she held all the top cards and played her hand just for all it was worth in accordance with the character, which, as I have tried to explain to you, she possessed. If to a revengeful spirit and a depraved mind you add a profound cunning and—what shall I call it?—a—a kind of impish humour that was almost cruel, you will perhaps begin to realize the odds against me in the game. Let alone the language she used—and that was lurid enough to make your hair curl—there was an evil atmosphere in the room that disturbed even so hard-bitten an old campaigner as I considered myself to be. Well, she began by asking me—I leave out the expletives—what my business was. To which I responded (knowing that my only chance with such an opponent lay in making a strenuous effort to match, and outbid, if possible, her cunning with a deeper cunning of my own) that I had every reason to suspect that she was to some extent involved in the case I was investigating and that I would therefore trouble her to give me a detail or two about her relations with Julian Scrimgeour.'

'With Julian?' I exclaimed, rather taken aback. 'That was surely drawing a bow at a venture.'

'It was, but I hit my mark. You see, Mr. Blair, from all you have told me of Mr. Balbirny, it was practically certain even to my suspicious mind that he was the last person in the world to go within a hundred miles of the Stingerson woman on his own account. More than that; I was pretty sure that only a strong devotion to a friend—such as he had for Scrimgeour—would have induced him to enter the house of a female of her soiled reputation. He'd simply loathe the job, wouldn't he?'

'Yes,' I agreed with some fervour, 'that's quite true.'

'Well then I argued, that his visit there on Sunday night was almost certainly undertaken on behalf of his friend. If that were so, then surely it was permissible to jump to the conclusion that it was to Mrs. Stingerson's flat that he and Scrimgeour had gone the night before. I was strengthened in this belief by the knowledge that Balbirny had steadily refused to say where they had been. Any way, as I said, I hit my mark. She was unprepared for the attack as delivered, and showed her annoyance by a withering blast of profanity. I followed up my initial success by telling her that I had every reason to believe that she was one of the last people who had seen Scrimgeour alive, and that it would be greatly to her disadvantage if she persisted in ignoring my request for information. I pitched my tune fairly high; I have always found that a little wholesome feeling of fear has a fine effect on loosening an unwilling tongue, especially if its possessor has something of a guilty conscience into the bargain.'

'I shouldn't have thought that Mrs. S. possessed anything that could possibly be called a conscience.'

'She doesn't, but'—Pittendrieck gave a short, harsh laugh—'but she's not devoid of the emotion of fear any more than the rest of us are, and she was ignorant of how much I knew about the whole affair.'

'Did she admit that Scrimgeour had been to see her on the Saturday night?'

'No, but her blustering denial convinced me that she was telling lie after lie on the point. She altogether protested a little bit too much, even to swearing that she had never even seen the man. That oath made me more suspicious than ever, and my suspicions were by no means lessened when, in answer to my next question, she declared in the most picturesque and forcible language that she had never heard of the name of Balbirny. Now, as I had actually seen Mr. Balbirny with my own eyes admitted into her flat, I had her at my mercy. And being in no mood to spare her in any degree whatsoever, I let myself go. I told her I knew she was a liar—just that, and in so many words—and after warning her that I had no intention of letting the matter drop, I made a show of leaving the place. This movement had the desired effect; she was after me

like a shot, pulling me back into the room. She then assured me that, if the name of the young fellow who had come to see her on Sunday night was really Balbirny, she had been unaware of the fact until my disclosure. I believe that on this point she was telling the truth. Then, when I asked her why he had come, she had the effrontery to tell me that my looks belied me if I imagined I could persuade her into thinking that I was such an innocent as my question showed me to be. I took her meaning at once, and retorted that I had not only seen Mr. Balbirny enter the flat, but that I had also seen him depart, he having been inside the house for exactly one minute and a half. Whereupon she swore that I, too, was a liar, and that the man I had seen go out was not Mr. Balbirny but somebody else. As I had watched the whole occurrence over the banisters from the half-way landing on the common stair leading to the flats above, I could ignore this statement—and told her so. Finally, she was forced into telling me that he had come for the purpose of liquidating an old debt. "Of his own, or of Mr. Scrimgeour's?" I demanded. "Ah," she retorted, "that you can — well find out for your — self!" By this time she had worked herself up to such a pitch of fury that, when I went on to inquire why the payment had been made, she flounced out of the room—only, however, to return almost immediately with the little girl in her arms. The poor thing had evidently been dragged out of bed, for she was in her nightdress and regarded me with the half-dazed, half-frightened look of a child just awakened from sleep and confronted suddenly with a strange face. "You ask why payment has been made?" her mother, leering in a beastly way, and indicating the child, snapped out at me. "Well, here's your answer; take a good look at it, and then perhaps you'll be able to recognize to whom I owe the brat."

'Horrible!' I exclaimed on hearing this. 'Damnable!' I amended, as the possible full significance of Pittendrieck's graphic story came home to me.

'You may well say that, Mr. Blair,' he went on, 'but I saw no likeness to Scrimgeour in the child. So sure was I of this that I called her bluff at once, and accused her of

levying blackmail on a man who, whatever his faults might have been, was certainly in a position to pay up. To this accusation she returned a rather curious answer—at least it was one which I had somehow not expected to hear. “I don’t give a damn who pays,” she jeered. “You men are all alike—brutes, every one of you—so what does it matter where the cash comes from so long as I live in comparative ease? You men have made me what I am, and it’s only fair that you should foot the bill.”

‘God help us, Pittendriech,’ was my comment on this. ‘There’s truth in what she said.’

‘Aye, sir, but only half the truth—and probably less than half the truth in Mrs. Stingerson’s case. On the face of it, I can’t deny that Scrimgeour must at some time or other have been associated with her, and it certainly looks as if he had allowed himself to get fairly well into her clutches. A glance at his banking account for the past few years will help us a bit on this point, and I propose to look into that. Meantime, may I ask whether you have anything to say that might throw a little further light on the subject?’

‘I? No—a hundred times no. The whole business is unthinkable to me from start to finish. I would have staked anything——’ I was vehemently going on, when I suddenly remembered Effie’s behaviour at our interview, and pulled myself up with a jerk. ‘Hold on a minute,’ I continued hurriedly; ‘it’s just possible that Mrs. Scrimgeour—and Sadde, too, for the matter of that—might tell us something if they would.’ And I gave Pittendriech a brief summary of the conversation I had had with the former.

‘We’re getting on, Mr. Blair,’ he commented, rubbing his hands with glee, ‘we’re getting on. I must have a talk with her next; also with friend Aloysius Sadde, though doubtless he’ll shield himself behind his cloth. By the way, I made a rapid survey of his rooms when he was out yesterday afternoon. I got into the house as an inspector in the Electricity Department. Unfortunately, the ruse didn’t give me much time, so that I came away without discovering any incriminating or suspicious facts about him. It’s a confounded nuisance having such a

marked physiognomy as mine for my particular work,' he added humorously. 'It's a face singularly difficult to disguise.'

I looked at him and laughed. 'It must be,' I agreed. 'I don't think you'd find it easy to deceive anybody who knew you at all well.'

'I have done it,' he answered merrily, 'and done it more than once. Well,'—he got up from his chair—'I must be getting along. The sooner we can find out about that car the better. I'll cause inquiries to be made among all the constables on duty in Edinburgh early last Sunday morning. We can hardly fail to get hold of one or two who must have noted the direction in which it was going. Then I'll see about inserting the advertisement concerning the offer of a reward in the papers. If I may, I'll come along later in the day and interview Mrs. Scrimgeour. She's hardly likely to be down as yet, is she?'

I told him to come whenever he found it convenient, and then asked him what further steps he meant to take in the matter of Mrs. Stingerson.

'None, at the moment,' he replied. 'We'll let her make the next move. I shouldn't be surprised if it doesn't turn out to be a move in the direction of an attempt to reopen negotiations with young Mr. Balbirny. She'll likely try and find out from him how much I really know, but she'll not get much change out of him.' He paused with his hand on the door, and looked at me with an expression which was eloquent of the satisfaction he was beginning to feel at the progress he was making. 'I'm more myself now, Mr. Blair,' he went on, 'for things are shaping well. You can cut out a lot of the rot I talked about my faculty of intuition. Not that it hasn't served me well, for, as a rule, it has. I think I must have been so irritated at the thought that it had failed me at the start of this most interesting case that I talked just nothing but blethers. I shan't offend again.' And, with a smile, he closed the door behind him.

The next moment he was back in the room once more. 'Sorry,' he said in explanation of his return, 'but I have forgotten one point. Have you seen or heard anything of Mr. Haggerstoun Grice since yesterday morning?'

'No,' I replied, 'I haven't. Why d'you ask?'

'Because, if you do, it will help me very considerably if you'll be good enough to let me know of anything he says or does that may strike you as peculiar in any sort of way. I don't wish him to spot that you're doing this for me, but, otherwise, I've no objection to your acquainting him with whatever information I have handed—or shall hand—on to you. I can't fathom his game as yet, but I'm as certain that he's somehow mixed up in this mystery of Julian Scrimgeour's as I am that I'm standing on my own feet.'

CHAPTER XII

THOUGH, from the point of view of the ordinary man in the street, Pittendriech's revelation of Julian's entanglement with Mrs. Stingeron would probably have been passed over with a shrug of the shoulder or some equivalent gesture, I could not lay it so lightly aside. I had known the man all his life, and so could not rid myself of a personal feeling of regret, not only that he should have been found out, but that what after all might have been nothing more than an isolated instance of surrender to the call of a natural instinct should have been fraught with such disastrous consequences. That it had been only an isolated instance I very soon convinced myself; everything I knew about Julian's career pointed in that direction. His devotion to his work and his play; his passionate attachment to Daphne; fifty other reasons all stood in the way of any other thought.

And then, as I pondered rather sadly over the situation we now had to face, a sudden sensation of red-hot resentment against his mother and all her insincerities seemed to surge right through me. So strongly, in fact, that, if the woman had been in the room with me, I verily believe I might so far have forgotten my manners as to curse her to her face. For, as sure as I knew I was sitting

in my chair, so surely was I convinced that she had failed her son in his needs not once but over and over again. How could it have been otherwise?

The whole of her existence had been regulated by a set of twopenny-halfpenny precepts eminently suited to a childish mind swayed only by the fear of punishment or the hope of reward, and singularly useless for dealing with the stern facts of life in any shape or form. To my own certain knowledge, she had systematically funkcd facing any fact that might in any way have threatened to disturb the slothful comfort she had always coveted for herself until she had become an expert in the all too easily acquired art of self-deception. I honestly think that she had—all unconsciously, as I hope, to herself—gradually come to persuade herself that facts—disagreeable or not, as the case might be—were not what they were in actuality but as she wanted them to be. I remembered, too, how she was for ever talking about and standing on her dignity—it was about the only thing she had to stand upon. And I could not forget the inordinate claim she had always made on Julian's affections; it had never been a question of give and take, for he had done the giving and she the taking all the time. Well, she was up against it now, though how she would face the music I hadn't the slightest idea. All I knew was that, whoever else might be blamed, she would have no hesitation in exonerating herself.

I had almost made up my mind to ask for an interview with her when fortunately a clerk arrived from the office bringing along various documents which required my signature. So I settled down to deal with them, determined to relegate the former unpleasant task to Pittendrieck and inwardly thanking my stars that I was in a position to make use of a substitute so capable of tackling the job without favour or without a qualm.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully enough until the evening. We had numerous visitors all agog to discuss the latest development of the Scrimgeour mystery, the publication of Grizel Lobban's story having whetted the public curiosity almost to fever heat. As was inevitable, the wildest rumours were flying about and we had perforce to listen to a score of variations on the one particular theme

most of the afternoon. But only from one of our visitors did we glean a trifle of information which might conceivably be of any real assistance.

This item was contributed by Dr. Craigie, who had been brought along to tea by Hubert Brett and who, over a cigar in the library afterwards, told me of a conversation which he had had with Julian a fortnight before. The talk had turned, at Julian's instigation according to Craigie, on the different means whereby an individual might be enabled to do another to death without the slightest fear of being caught out later on. I am not going to enlighten the reader on the various methods which were divulged to me—there are people who find it difficult to avoid temptation in this as well as in other matters—and am indeed only alluding to the incident because of the reason given by Julian to Craigie for introducing such an absorbing if somewhat gruesome subject for discussion. He had explained that he wanted the information in connexion with the case of an old man who had been found dead in his chair some years back under circumstances which strongly pointed in the direction of foul play. There had been no prosecution of anybody, because the expert medical men who had examined the corpse had utterly failed to discover any suspicious cause of death at all. Nobody had even been suspected of committing a crime, but Julian, as a result of reading over the evidence taken before the Procurator Fiscal, had declared that he had had no doubt in his mind that one of two witnesses present during the inquiry had in actual fact done the deed. Craigie was unable to give me the name of the old man or the date of his death because Julian had been silent on these points, but, in thanking him for the information, I said that doubtless the facts would be known to Pittendriech and that I would place them before him when he came.

The detective turned up shortly before nine o'clock, and while we were waiting for Effie to come downstairs—she had been gently prepared by Daphne during the afternoon for the ordeal in front of her—I asked him if he knew about the case. He said at once that he'd been engaged upon it himself and that he quite agreed with Julian's conclusions. It had been one of the cases which he had himself discussed

with Julian, and discussed with some heat because it had been his settled conviction that the evidence had clearly pointed towards one man and not two being the guilty party.

'This man I saw myself yesterday,' he said, with a chuckle of amusement and as casually as if he were alluding to an old friend. 'I had thought of him as possibly being concerned in the present case, but his alibi was the most perfect of the lot. He was being detained in custody on a charge of being drunk and assaulting the police at ten o'clock on Saturday night.'

We were still laughing over this episode when Daphne brought Mrs. Scrimgeour into the room. I had not seen her since our last rather tearful conversation, so I was agreeably surprised to find her looking much more composed than she had been on that occasion. She surprised me still further when, after seating herself near the fire, she turned to Pittendriech and asked him quietly what his business with her might be.

The detective was also taken aback, and for a moment seemed to be in some doubt as to what he should say in reply. Then: 'Is Miss Blair to remain here?' he inquired.

It was Daphne who answered the question. 'I have promised to stay with Mrs. Scrimgeour,' she said as firmly as might be.

'Then you must not blame me if you hear some things spoken which may distress you quite a lot.'

'I won't,' said Daphne, facing him in all the glory of her youthful purity and pride. 'Please go on.'

Pittendriech still hesitated, and I could see he did not relish his job. I did not want Daphne in the room myself, and was silently anathematizing Effie for selfishly dragging her into the business when she spoke again.

'Do, please, get on with it, Mr. Pittendriech,' she observed, 'don't worry about me.'

'Well, Mrs. Scrimgeour,' he began at last, 'there are one or two questions which I should like to ask, and I may say that I only do so in the hope that your answers will be of great assistance to me in my search for your son. First, then, as regards money matters—Mr. Blair here has already acquainted me with the amount of your annual

income and has also told me that Mr. Scrimgeour has five hundred a year in his own right—now, what I wish to know is this ; has this income of his, plus whatever sum he has made from his work, been sufficient for his needs during the past five or six years, or has he from time to time had to draw upon you as well ? ’

‘ Do you think I could have denied the poor boy anything he cared to ask ? ’ was Effie’s tearful and querulous answer. She was one of those people who seem to be constitutionally incapable of meeting a direct question with a direct reply.

‘ Then, I take it, he has occasionally done so,’ said Pittendriech, getting into his stride. ‘ May I inquire as to what extent ? ’

‘ I can’t very well tell you the exact amounts ; of course I gave him whatever he asked for, as I conceive I had a right to do.’

‘ Quite so. Well, then, has he ever had—say—as much as five hundred in the course of a single year ? ’

‘ How can I tell you that ? I—I didn’t write the amounts down, and I never can remember anything if I don’t make a note of it at the time.’

‘ I see. Well, did he ever tell you why he wanted the money ? ’

This question shook her rather badly, and she seemed to shrink further into herself. ‘ Oh, just for various odds and ends,’ she managed at last to stammer out.

‘ Such as ? ’ asked Pittendriech, as inexorably persistent as ever.

‘ Oh, for tailor’s bills and—er—car expenses and—er—things of that kind.’

‘ Never for any specific purpose ? ’

‘ I don’t understand what you mean.’

‘ Well, I will try and make my meaning clearer. Have you ever had reason to suspect that Mr. Scrimgeour was being blackmailed ? ’

On hearing this, Effie wilted like a leaf caught by the morning frost, while Daphne regarded the speaker with widely-opened eyes. It was some time before the former could bring herself to reply, and there was an ominous quaver in her voice when she did make the effort.

'Am I to answer that question, Colin?' she asked, addressing her remark to me.

'For the boy's sake, Effie,' I answered, 'I think it would be wise.'

She grasped hysterically at Daphne's hand and gripped it hard. 'There was a—a debt of—of honour,' she began with a jerk, but suddenly broke down.

'Good God!' I exclaimed, as, knowing what Pittendriech had told me, the possible significance of this halting admission came home to me. 'D'you mean to say——? Why in the world didn't you come and consult me on a matter of that sort?'

This was asking for trouble, and I got it. 'You have always shown yourself so sympathetically ready to help me all these years, haven't you, Colin?' she said in her most reproachful tones.

The detective promptly came to my assistance. 'If,' said he, 'there was a debt of honour, to whom was it due?'

This question was asked in vain, for Effie by this time had dissolved into the usual flood of tears and was quite incapable of making any reply. But Pittendriech went remorselessly on, disregarding her pitiable condition in a way I could not have hoped—or wished—to emulate. 'Was it due to a Mrs. Sally Stingerson?' he asked, *loud* court.

On hearing this, Effie, to my surprise—and his—sat up, dabbed her eyes, and gave her answer almost with eagerness. 'I've never heard the name,' she declared.

'Ah,' said Pittendriech, recovering himself quickly. 'Then, if not to Mrs. Stingerson, to whom, if I may ask?'

'You may ask,' came the immediate answer, almost rudely, as it seemed to me, 'but I have made a vow that I will never tell, and that vow I shall not break.'

'Not if circumstances alter cases and make the keeping of that vow—perhaps given under the stress of some strong emotion—quite unreasonable now?' I ventured to suggest. 'Think, Effie, before you make a decision. If this knowledge you are concealing might be of any possible use to Mr. Pittendriech, are you justified in doing anything else but revealing it for the benefit of your own son?'

I might as well have saved my breath. 'You are not

likely to understand the sanctity of a vow, Colin,' she retorted. 'Whatever the consequences may be, I cannot break it.'

'But could not Father Sadde absolve you from your vow?' asked Daphne, who had frowned heavily on hearing Effie's answer to me. 'Surely something of the sort could be done, if the necessity were made clear to him? Have you no thought for Julian?'

This direct appeal led to a fresh outflow of tears. 'I must consult the Reverend Father,' sobbed Effie, 'but I d—doubt if he can do anything to h—help.'

Daphne shrugged her shoulders and said no more. But Pittendriech tried his luck again.

'Well, Mrs. Scrimgeour, he said, 'perhaps you won't mind answering this, pending the consultation. Was the debt due to a woman or a man?'

But to this question was vouchsafed no reply, and a like fate befell all subsequent attempts on his part and mine to make her speak. It was obvious that the woman was so greatly under the powerful influence of real or imaginary fears that she could not even collect her thoughts, much less express them. Neither cajolery nor threat nor appeal for Julian's sake served to move her, and at last in desperation we gave up the task and Daphne led her from the room. The recollection of her conduct affects me even yet—as I write months after the event—much in the same way as the Union Jack affects a red-hot Communist.

After she and Daphne had gone, I looked at the detective and caught a bitter little smile on his lips. 'Well,' I said, 'there's nothing more to be done in that direction at any rate until we've called in the Reverend Father Sadde.'

'The devil take him!' growled Pittendriech. 'Still, it may be worth our while. You might see what you can do to-morrow, Mr. Blair. What between Mrs. Scrimgeour and the Stingerson woman and Mr. Balbirny all behaving like oysters, I'm hampered on every side. They all know something—confound the lot of them! Mr. Balbirny, I'm sure, is shielding his friend from a chivalrous but mistaken sense of gratitude. He, I feel certain, handed over a large sum of money to Mrs. Stingerson last night—that's why I enquired so closely into the Scrimgeour

financial affairs. I wished to find out whether she—possibly at the instigation of her father-confessor—had suddenly cut off supplies and so left her son in the lurch? I think it's quite likely, but I wish I knew. As for Mrs. Stingerson, her game is to lie low, say nothing, and grab all she can get. But I'd give a good deal to find out whether Scrimgeour was for certain in her toils. Mrs. Scrimgeour—here he spoke with a concentrated bitterness that clearly showed the chargin he felt over the rebuff she had given him—'well, Mrs. Scrimgeour is nothing more nor less than an awful warning.'

I laughed at the expression used. 'Why that?' I asked.

'Because she's too much of a fool to be conscious of her own knavery,' he replied hotly. 'You must keep pegging away at her—either you or Miss Blair. It's possible she'll give herself away sooner or later. No, thank you,' he went on, declining my offer of a whisky and soda, 'I must be getting along. Oh, by the way, you'll be interested to hear that every constable who was on duty in Edinburgh or the district early on Sunday morning has already been—or will be—interrogated on the question of any cars seen at or about three o'clock or shortly after. I have already reports of four; the man at the Haymarket says he saw three, two going towards Corstorphine and one along the Dalry Road. Another fellow saw the fourth going at great speed in the direction of Liberton, but he got its number all right. But the trouble is that there seem to have been a good many cars about. There would be, of course, after the International match. I take my hat off to the cleverness of the men who worked the job; all things considered, they could not have chosen a better night for their evil deed.'

I had a few words with Daphne before going to bed, and asked her to do what she could to get round Mrs. Scrimgeour. I could see that she was beginning to feel the strain of looking after that wretched woman more than a bit, and I suggested that we might send Effie home again and get a nurse in to look after her. But my daughter wouldn't hear of it. She said she'd prefer to have Effie under her immediate eye, as she thought there would in that way be a better chance of finding something out.

But she also insisted that, if she was to carry out the disagreeable task, it was only fair that I should tell her all that we knew or suspected concerning the relationship between Julian and Mrs. Stingeron. As I considered her request eminently reasonable, I gave her the information she required.

She thought it all over carefully before making any comment. Then: 'Thank you, Dad,' she said quietly, 'but I think there must be some ghastly mistake. I don't mean to deny that Pittendriech's discoveries and Nigel's visit and Effie's shamefaced and utterly stupid and reluctant half-confidences all seem to show that Julian was mixed up with Mrs. Stingeron some years ago. But I find it hard to believe. You see, I've known him as well as anybody and seen as much of him and talked as much with him as anybody these two or three years, and it's all so much out of keeping with his character. I'm not so ignorant as not to know what men and women are—neither you nor dear old Mums were ever foolish enough either to refuse an answer to any question I cared to ask, or to limit my reading in any sort of way—and I admit that Julian may have done what he is accused, or suspected, of doing. It's quite possible, but I think I should have found it out from him if it had been so. He used to tell me all about himself and the difficulties—what he called the mental conflicts—he was eternally up against. He was always far too introspective and a deal too diffident about himself, and much too concerned about what other people might be thinking about him than he ought to have been. He always made me feel as if I were a sort of mother to him when he spoke like that—I, who was seven years younger than he.'

These were interesting revelations, and I encouraged her to go on. 'When you think of Effie,' I said, 'you can't altogether be surprised.'

'No,' she agreed at once, 'and in a dim sort of way I recognized the point. Well, knowing Julian for what he was—a man whose conscience never let him alone for a single minute—I honestly believe he could not have brought himself to ask me to marry him without first confessing what to him must have seemed a terrible sin.'

Especially in view of the fact that he knew I held no narrow or puritanical opinions on the subject at all.'

This was—I won't say—an altogether unexpected but, rather, a startling bit of news. 'When did he ask you, my dear?' I couldn't help inquiring.

'Sunday a week ago,' she replied, and then sat silent for awhile staring at the fire. Then, looking me fairly in the eyes, she went on. 'I refused him, Dad, and I've been worried about it ever since, especially now that all this trouble has happened. I felt that I had deprived him of a support which he had always counted on having, and that I ought not to have allowed him to lean so much upon it during the last two years at least. But he interested me immensely, and I suppose I was flattered by the feeling that he was so dependent on me—he, who to all outward appearances was so magnificent an athlete and so splendid a fellow. Sad, isn't it? But, somehow or other, I felt that when I did come to marry I should prefer a husband with rather more backbone. Funny thing, life.'

She paused for a moment after making this profoundly true remark, and I sat quietly where I was, thanking all my gods that she had brought herself to confide in me. The young woman of the present day doesn't easily confess to the possession of any sort of sentiment, but it's there all the same—just as it always was and as it always will be.

Presently she resumed her story, speaking more in her usual tones. 'And then, old thing,' she said, 'you see, there's always been Nigel. Nigel'—she laughed, perhaps a little sadly—'who has never made me feel as if I were only a mother to him.'

'No,' I interrupted gleefully, for her words gave me great joy, 'he wouldn't. He's been lucky enough to have a glorious one of his own. Just like you and the boys, eh?'

She nodded. 'He's not brilliant,' she went on, ticking off, as it were, his disabilities one by one, 'and there isn't a feature of his face that you'd write home about except, perhaps, his eyes. They're rather fetching, I think. He's no appreciation of books—especially those by our modern high-brow novelists—and I can give him a stroke a hole at golf and beat him every time. But he can laugh

at himself as well as at other people ; he'd knock you down sooner than tell you a lie ; and I reckon he knows how to love. Yes, take it all round,' she summed up, 'I've known worse men than Nigel Balbirny.'

I laughed gaily, and held out my hands to her. 'Your sentiments, Daphne,' I said, 'are, curiously enough, not at all unlike my own.'

She grasped my hands, and for a second or two stood gazing steadily at me. Then she suddenly stooped, and kissed me on the lips. 'You're a bit of an old dear yourself, you know,' she declared, 'and I'm really rather sorry you're having such a rotten time of it just now. But, to return to the subject of Julian for a moment,—here her voice resumed its gravity of tone—'there's one other thing I wanted to say. Even if we take Mrs. Stinger's suggestions to Pittendriech as gospel truth—and they were only suggestions, you know—and admit that Julian actually was the father of her child, I can't for the life of me see how Julian's disappearance can have anything to do with her. Surely, if she was getting money out of him, she of all people would stand to lose by having him put out of the way?'

'By Jove, Daphne, you're right there!' I exclaimed. 'I hadn't thought of that. But, on the other hand, any knowledge we can get of his past—or—difficulties must help in unravelling the mystery. I think that's the way Pittendriech is viewing the case. You see, we're so hopelessly in the dark about everything even now. Everybody, except Effie, is contributing a bit of information on the subject, but the total amount of light we've got gives us about as much illumination on the main points as you'd get from a glow-worm. I mean that we can't even give a guess at the identity of the person or persons who so feared or hated Julian that they were compelled to take such drastic—not to say, criminal—measures to dispose of him. And until we can find out what he did to excite their fears or their detestation, we can't get much forwarder.'

'I see,' said Daphne, thoughtfully. 'Well, I stick to my point about Mrs. Stinger. I think that it's more likely that his association with crooks has got him into

trouble. There's sense in what Pittendriech says about that; Julian may quite easily have alarmed some of them, even though he may only have been investigating the psychology of their peculiar minds. He may have found something out that was dangerous for him to know, and no explanation of his that he was merely interested in the subject from a scientific point of view would cut much ice with people in fear of the hangman's rope.'

'That's all very well,' I said, 'but it leaves us much where we were. Pittendriech has rounded up all the crooks he thought might have been concerned in the job, and they've all made good an alibi. He says that the actors will likely be found in a rather different circle of society than that usually frequented by his criminal pals. Which, if it be true, does not make his task any the easier.'

We argued the point this way and that, and in the end were forced to give it up without coming to any conclusion. Worried, however, though I was over the whole affair, I went to bed that Tuesday night in a delightfully contented frame of mind. For, though no father can possibly view with any sort of complacency the approach of a suitor for his daughter's hand, Daphne's declaration of her feelings towards Nigel had bucked me up a lot. If she had to go, then I knew no other young man to whom I would rather entrust her future happiness.

CHAPTER XIII

THE papers on Wednesday morning were filled with all sorts of conflicting rumours about the case. That it was exciting universal interest was proved by the fact that *The Caledonian* went to the length of printing a short but erudite leading article on the subject. After reviewing all the evidence available and comparing it with the known facts of several historic instances of similar character, the author proceeded to prophesy that the victim of this latest outrage—whether

dead or alive—would be found not a hundred miles from Edinburgh.

In the same paper there was a letter from a correspondent signing himself 'A Stitch in Time,' in which the writer strongly urged that an organized search for the missing man should be carried out without delay within a radius of twenty miles from the Kirk of St. Giles. This anonymous individual flavoured his remarks with a generous tribute to the established reputation of Christie Pittendriech, but added that even with his admitted abilities it was beyond reason to expect that any one man could cope with all that should be done. And he brought his letter to a conclusion by an eloquent appeal to all good sportsmen to give such assistance to the authorities as might be in their power.

I read this communication with much interest, and felt that the writer knew what he was talking about; not that I thought he was necessarily correct in his views but that I was convinced of the importance of leaving no stone unturned that might resolve our anxieties one way or the other. The aid given by a large and willing body of searchers, even if it came to nothing, would at least not be productive of any harm. That the advice tendered in this letter had met with the cordial approval of others besides myself was speedily proved by the arrival of Nigel Balbirny shortly after eleven o'clock. He had only looked in for a minute, he announced, for the purpose of telling us that his father had unexpectedly turned up an hour before and had promptly proceeded to turn him out of the office.

'Lord knows what sort of a hash the old man will make of the business,' he grinned, 'for he's hopelessly behind the times. But he's dead keen for me to follow up the idea of some Johnny or other who's been writing to the paper. You've read the letter, I suppose? Well, the guv'nor, who usually keeps his head and doesn't as a rule pay much attention to any other notions than his own, has gone right off his chump. He's obsessed with the idea that this writer fellow has had a brain wave of stupendous magnitude, and seems to think that four or five hundred sportsmen nosing up and down over an immense tract of country like a lot of retrievers will run old Julian to earth in a brace of shakes. I'm not so optimistic myself, but, to

humour the old man, I'm going to buzz round calling for volunteers. What do you think, Uncle Colin ?'

'I think there's a good deal to be said in favour of the plan, though I admit the prospects of success are rather vague. Still, it's worth trying.'

Nigel continued to grin. 'Well,' he said, 'the conscript fathers of the nation having spoken, as old Cicero would have put it, there's nothing to be done but get on with the job. But what I came round here to find out was whether that wily old bird, Pittendriech, has the foggiest idea as to which direction the pack should run ? The area of search is fortunately diminished by the North Sea to the east, but, even then, there's a deuce of a lot of ground to cover.'

'I haven't heard from him this morning,' I replied. 'Why not ring him up and ask ?'

Nigel promptly carried out my suggestion, and, judging from the satisfied tone of many of his ejaculatory (and slangy) remarks, seemed to be thoroughly enjoying himself. Presently he hung up the receiver, and turned a beaming countenance on Daphne and me.

'The celebrated sleuth-hound is a bit above himself,' said he, 'and more inclined than usual to hand the port round. Apparently lots of honest citizens have owned up to the fact that they'd been out on the razzle pretty late on Saturday night or rather—which makes it so much worse—pretty early on Sunday morning. They all admit having left the purlieus of Auld Reekie at or about three o'clock a.m. in their cars, but deny—every blessed one of them—that they'd been anywhere near Rattray Terrace or that any such thought as the notion of kidnapping Julian had ever entered their brains—fuddled or otherwise. But the great news is that Pittendriech has just heard that a derelict car has been found sunk in a pond up one of the more deserted and wilder Pentland glens north of the parish of Kilsyre. From his description of the place I've an idea that I may know it pretty well ; it's only about five miles away from our little grey home in the west. Well, he wants me to get hold of half a dozen stout fellows and meet him at the haunted spot as quick as poss. He's taking out tackle with him for dragging the pond, and says he'll be glad of our help.'

'What about a car, my bright boy?' asked Daphne, as soon as he had given his report. 'Would you like to have ours?'

'No jolly fear, old girl,' he smiled back. 'We want something that will stand a lot of wear and tear; something that we can manoeuvre over soggy moss and craggy fell. In a weak moment—doubtless due to the condition of temporary insanity from which he's now suffering—the pater told me I might have the use of "Black Maria," Poor old dear! she's on her last legs, and I swear it's a shame to trot her about any more. But the girls persuaded the old man to have her patched up "just once more"—you know, he's like wax in their hands—and she's been ready and waiting more than a week in Sinton's garage for somebody to take pity on her and guide her safely home. I wouldn't be found dead in her myself, as a general rule, but'—he paused, and solemnly winked an eye at Daphne—'I'm taking her now. By the time I've finished with her, well, I reckon there'll be precious little left of her bar bones.'

He hurried off, leaving us to digest his news as best we might, and it must, I think, have been about twenty minutes after his departure that he rang up from the garage to give us the astounding information that 'Black Maria' was no longer there. According to Sinton's story, the old lady had been handed over about noon on the day of the International match to Nigel himself! That young man, having expressed his profound regret that he had no time to favour us with his more fruity comments on the situation, simply contented himself with letting us know that Robin Kilgour, like the good fellow he was, had come to the rescue with the offer of another car. He added that he hoped to see us in the evening when he would report whatever further developments might meantime have occurred.

I had hardly had time to assimilate this puzzling bit of news when Haggerstoun Grice was shown into the library. He was looking as spry as ever, and wasted no time before explaining the reason for his visit.

'This case of young Scrimgeour's,' he said, taking a chair and regarding me with an inquiring eye, 'continues to

intrigue me quite a lot. There's a bizarre touch about it, Blair, that raises it out of the ruck of the commonplace and places it in a category of its own. Even old fogeys at the Club like Dundas-Smith and old Gilly Jobson spare a few moments from their sacred rubber of bridge or their scowling perusal of the financial columns of *The Times* to tell us all "what ought to be done about it, sir!" As far as I can see from the papers this morning, things are beginning to move a bit, and that's all to the good. But I'm not at all satisfied with the progress that's been made.'

'Why, what more can we do than has already been done?' I asked, a little testily. 'Of course, if you know nothing further of the case than what you've read about it in the papers, I can supplement your knowledge very considerably in the next few minutes if you care to listen to the yarn.'

'That's why I came,' he retorted, in a tone of voice which frankly implied that he considered himself entitled to the information. 'Look here, Blair, I'm not particularly interested in Scrimgeour—never have been, for the matter of that—but I'm concerned, quite as much as anybody else, about the speedy discovery, the prompt capture, and the just punishment of the devil or devils who've done him in.'

This last assertion was spoken so convincingly that I gave a little start of surprise. For, remembering how Pittendriech had cautioned me concerning my visitor, I suddenly became aware of a horrible suspicion worming its way into my mind. If H.G.—to shorten his confounded name—felt such certainty on the point, might it not be possible that he had come by his knowledge in a way which I almost shuddered even to contemplate in the inmost recesses of my heart? So taken aback was I at the mere idea that I must have sat staring at the man for quite thirty seconds with my mouth half-opened to speak and never a word coming through.

He saw the look and made a little gesture significant of irritation. 'Why are you staring at me like that?' he asked indignantly. 'Do you take me for the criminal?'

'Well,' I replied, pulling myself together and smiling a trifle uneasily, 'I was wondering why you were so sure that Scrimgeour had been "done in"?''

He burst into a roar of laughter by way of reply. 'Well, I'm damned!' he exclaimed, as soon as he had recovered. 'No, my friend,' he went on, still chuckling loudly, 'I'm capable of many misdemeanours, but I do draw the line at committing a capital crime. I could no more kill a man than I could—er—rob a poor widow of her mite. Mind you, I don't blame you for your suspicions; I imagine you've arrived at the stage of suspecting everybody and anybody in this mysterious case. That's true, eh?'

'More or less,' I answered, laughing heartily myself. 'And so would you have done, H.G., if you had been in my place. But,' I went on after a pause, wholly disliking the rôle of duplicity that was being forced upon me, 'I'm quite ready to show my implicit trust in you by telling you everything I know of the wretched business from the time it started up to the last disquieting piece of intelligence I got by 'phone less than five minutes ago.'

'Good,' he replied. 'Let me assure you, Blair, you won't regret any confidence you may care to give. As a matter of fact, I'm going all out to mop up the mess. There's devilish work going on somewhere, and, as a devoted custodian of the fair fame of this historic city of ours, if for no other reason, I'm going to do my damndest to sweep the streets clean of the dirt that's polluting them.'

There was a ring of sincerity about the man's words; indeed, I had never seen him so strangely or so powerfully moved. Almost at once my suspicions began to die away, and the feeling of trust which replaced them was mightily strengthened by his next remark.

'I'll tell you why I'm so sure that Scrimgeour has been "done in,"' he said. 'It's partly because I'm not exactly a fool myself, and can occasionally put two and two together and make them four; and partly because I'm not ignorant of Scrimgeour's real character. Public opinion was the god he worshipped—he basked in the sunshine of its approval, and would have been the last man in the world to jeopardize the position he had won. Curious that so able a sportsman should have possessed so little of the true spirit of sport.'

Curious, too, I thought, that I, who had known him so long and so well, should have been the last person in the

world to find it out. Even now I was not altogether prepared to accept Grice's estimate, even backed up as it had been by Daphne's revelations, without some sort of modification. 'Well,' I said, 'you may be right, H.G., but we don't know all the facts, and I, for one, would be chary of judging the man too hastily. However, that's neither here nor there, and just now I propose to put you wise on all I know.'

I told him everything, only omitting any mention of the pact I had made with Christie Pittendriech. He listened to every word of my story with the keenest attention, only interrupting the narrative occasionally to ask a question on some point that I had not put clearly enough. When I had finished, he put three or four more.

'About the Lobban lassie,' he said, 'I take it she was certain that one of the men she saw was in police uniform?'

'Yes.'

'And about young Balbirny, that he certainly visited the Stingerson woman on Sunday night?'

'Yes.'

'And that Sadde certainly means to marry Mrs. Scrimgeour—if he can?'

'Yes, though, if I can stop him, that scheme won't come off.'

'Right. Thank you. Well now, Blair, d'you think the lady will have any objection to my inspecting her son's rooms?'

This request was so unexpected that I made no immediate reply. What, I wondered, might be his little game? If he was honest in his expressed determination to hunt down the malefactors, was it likely that he, the uninstructed amateur, could possibly unearth any clue to their identity from the proposed investigation next door when Pittendriech, the trained professional, had failed after the most exhaustive search to find anything of the kind? If, on the other hand, he had, as Pittendriech had hinted, been actually involved in some shady proceedings of Julian's, might it not be conceivable that this visit might be a simple ruse to reap some deep and dark advantage for himself? And once again a feeling of suspicion rose to the surface of my mind. For whether he went or stayed away, the effect in either case might be fortunate or the reverse. I didn't know what to do, and

so, with an inward chuckle of amusement, decided to leave the decision to Effie.

'There's no knowing whether she will or not,' I replied at last, 'but we can soon find out, if you'll be good enough to touch that bell.'

He did so, and I instructed the waitress who answered it to take his message to Mrs. Scrimgeour and ask for an immediate reply. When it came, it was in the affirmative, and H.G. at once left the house. While we were waiting for it, however, he said a few words which I must not fail to record.

'Queer business that story of young Balbirny's about the disappearance of his car,' he mused. 'I like Balbirny,' he added, after a moment's pause. 'I wish you'd ask him to come along and see me after he's been here to-night.'

I promised to do so, and then sat pondering over the interview for quite a while after his departure. Put in a nutshell, the question I kept on asking myself was whether Haggerstoun Grice was working for or against Pittendriech? Ostensibly, they were both pegging away with the same object in view; both going all out to lay hands on Julian's assailants—his murderers, rather, if their assumptions were correct—yet both showing no desire for any mutual collaboration. This determination to proceed—each of them—on his own particular path was what bunkered me. Pittendriech, it was true, had left me in no doubt as to his opinion of Grice, and was even having the man's movements watched. But Grice on the other hand had, if not exactly effusively, at least openly, referred to the detective as a first-rate man at his job. The more I considered the puzzle, the less I was inclined to believe in the *bona fides* of Grice. On the surface and taking everything into account, the motive underlying his extraordinary zeal could not be so clearly fathomed as that which was instigating Pittendriech's strenuous exertions. After a bit I gave the riddle up; the only thing about which I could feel any sort of certainty was that I had been placed in the somewhat invidious position of being a catspaw between the two. Well, if that was the game they chose to play, they were at liberty to play it; I did not see what they hoped to gain by the method, and I comforted myself by the reflection that by

lying low and saying nothing much I might in the end find myself in a position to dictate terms to one or both of them.

Tom Balbirny dropped in to tea on his way home, and wasted a good deal of energy cursing the misbegotten son of sin who had had the infernal impertinence to steal his valuable car. He said he had been round to see Sinton, who had expressed himself as being almost prepared to take his oath that it was to Nigel he had handed over 'Black Maria' about noon on Saturday. The man admitted that, owing to the crowd of cars coming in and going out at the time, he had had but a hurried glimpse of the young man, but was sure he couldn't have been mistaken. And he added, in corroboration of his statement, that Nigel when inquiring for the car had actually alluded to it by its pet name. Beyond this, Tom had no other news to give, and presently took himself off in as puzzled a state as I was myself.

Shortly after five the Reverend Aloysius called, and had a long interview with Effie in the drawing-room upstairs. I did not see the fellow myself, but the net result of his visit was as unsatisfactory as it well could be. It simply stiffened Effie in her determination not to open her mouth any more on the subject of Julian's so-called debt of honour. She told Daphne that Sadde, after extolling the sanctity of any vow and praising the heroic resolution she had shown in keeping hers against undue and unkind pressure, had been generous enough to allow her to inform us that in his opinion the whole business about which we sought information had been nothing but a trifling—'venial' was the word he used, by the way—venial sin, which could have had nothing to do with the problem now before us, and which, even if we knew its nature, would be of no assistance to us in any sort of way.

Daphne, I noticed, showed herself as anything but tolerant of Effie's conduct, while telling me all this; for the first time in her life she spoke of our unwelcome guest as if she had very little use for that miserable woman. I rallied her on the point, teasing her about geese not always being swans and jokingly congratulating her on coming more into line with Nigel and myself.

'Well, Dad,' she said, with a delightful little snort of

indignation, 'there really is a limit to one's sufferance of fools. Effie is entitled to say what she likes about Julian's virtues—I've had to listen to a whole category of them this evening—but she's jolly well not going to run down Nigel, or anybody else, in the way she did. It's not good enough, and she didn't like it when I told her so.'

'Oho!' I exclaimed, 'and what had she to say against Nigel?'

'Said she was afraid he hadn't had a good influence over Julian—a man five years older than himself!' Daphne retorted with fine disdain. 'But I made her sit up before I was through with her; I asked her to explain exactly what she meant, and, you know, if there's one thing on earth she loathes more than another, it's being pinned down to give a reason for anything she's said. Well, she haved away for a bit trying to wriggle out of the difficulty she was in, just like a trout on a hook. Then, as there was nothing doing that way, she fell back on her reserve trenches, or, to put it plainer, had recourse to a stance of spurious dignity. Which, in its turn, jolly soon dissolved into an ocean of tears. But I didn't give that for her dignity'—here Daphne snapped her finger and thumb—'nor that for her tears'—here she repeated the action with the finger and thumb of her other hand—and a mighty effective action it was. 'No, old man, I really didn't. I pushed on till I had got her into a corner where she was hemmed in on every side. So she had to cough up her miserable little scandal, or perish, so to speak, at the point of the sword. And it all came to this; that Julian had once hinted to her that Nigel had not always been "as nice and honourable, dear, in his relationship with women as we could have hoped." That fairly put the lid on it. I told her straight that Julian had never hinted anything of the sort, and then toddled out of the room, you know, with my head very much in the air.'

'Daphne,' I said, 'can't we get rid of the woman? There's no sort of sense in putting up with——'

'Oh, if she wishes to clear out, I shan't stand in her way,' she interrupted cheerfully. 'But I must say I was surprised at her remark. It's not like her to go out of her way to peddle such garbage round.'

'I wonder if Sadde has had anything to do with it? It's possible he might be trying to poison her mind.'

'He might. But, if so, why?'

'I don't know; the thought just struck me. You see, he's spent over an hour with her and may simply have been employing his time trying to cheer her up a bit by comparing the two men together to the glorification of Julian and the detriment of Nigel.'

'Well, the scheme hasn't come off,' said Daphne, with that slow smile of hers which is so fascinating to watch. 'It's had the directly opposite effect.'

The truth of which statement was proved up to the hilt a little later on by the reception she recorded to Nigel when he returned to the house about nine o'clock. She welcomed him with all her old gaiety of manner but with an added warmth which he did not fail to notice any more than I did myself. She merely asked him whether he had had anything to eat, but she did it in such a way that the man was nearly swept off his feet. I saw him look at her with such an expression of adoration in his eyes that, straight and brave as she was, she could not meet his gaze. Laughing merrily, she turned away from him, and, as I watched, the words he was longing to pour fourth—to my imagination, they were hovering on his lips—seemed as if they could not have been restrained.

Yet he did not utter a sound, and to my amazement, after a mighty inward struggle with himself, the intensity of which was reflected on his honest face, he returned to his customary manner of lighthearted persiflage and fun. It wasn't my presence in the room that held him back; he had too often quite sincerely and unaffectedly told Daphne of his love for her before his own people and myself and even Julian to be put off by so small a matter as that. I knew with certainty that I should have altogether faded out of his sight had the realization of her greater tenderness moved him to a more fervent declaration of his passion than ever he had made before. No; there was, I felt, some other reason for his self-control, and I waited with a keen interest to hear what it might be.

'You're sure you won't nibble a spot of fodder, Nigel?' she asked, wondering at his silence and turning towards

him to discover the reason thereof. 'There are still a few handfuls of mouldy old oats left in the family bin.'

'Always ready to eat out of your hands, old girl,' he grinned in reply, 'but I had a snack at home. Besides, when you've grasped the significance of the highly-coloured yarn I'm about to unfold, you may not be so keen to hand out the rations. For, you see, when we had hoicked the car out of the pond, there was dear old "Black Maria" fairly staring me in the face and giving me the shock of my innocent young life. There, too, under the back seat was found the identical tunic which I wore when in a weak moment I was beguiled into taking the dud bobby's part in those theatricals at Marjorie Stronach's two weeks ago. Worse of all, there was friend Pittendriech indecently gloating over the discovery he had made and regarding me with such an eye of doom that made me almost feel as if the hangman's noose was already tightening round my neck.'

I gazed at him with the utmost concern, and so did Daphne. It is true he had spoken as nonchalantly and straightforwardly as ever, but that there was an underlying uneasiness in his mind was obvious from the very expressions he had seen fit to use. And there was a troubled look in his eyes; it certainly belied the smile that was playing around his lips. Also, contrary to his usual custom, he ceased to babble cheerily on; it seemed as if he had nothing more to say.

Presently, as the unwonted silence was becoming more and more painful, I felt that something must be said. 'Now, what the devil does it all mean?' I asked anxiously.

'That's what I want to know, Uncle Colin. The pater asked me the same question, and I'm blessed if I could give him an answer. He appeared to think that somebody—or, rather, the fellow who's responsible for Julian's disappearance—must have had his knife into me as well.'

'I take it you didn't find—er—that there was no sign of Julian himself?'

'Not a trace; I can tell you we dragged that pond pretty thoroughly.'

'That's all to the good, anyway. It looks to me as if the whole incident was a kind of red herring drawn across the real trail.'

'That's what I was thinking, too,' Daphne here chimed in. 'Now, mylad,'—she turned to Nigel—'we've got to get to the bottom of this dirty little plot, so just forget you've had rather a hectic day and answer me a few questions in your well-known breezy manner.'

Her air of cheery optimism was most infectious; it acted like a ray of sunshine on me as well as Nigel.

'Fire away,' he said, with a mock expression of alarm.

'Well, first of all, how many people—all told—have their knives into you? And, if any, their names and their addresses?'

Nigel pondered for a moment before replying. 'Sorry, old girl,' he said, 'I know it sounds rather feeble, but I can't call one to mind.'

'What about Julian?' The words were as sharply spoken as they were unexpected.

'Julian?' Nigel's repetition of the name was in a tone of indignant reproof. 'No—a thousand times, no! Not as long as he was sane,' he added as an afterthought.

'But he wasn't sane the last time you saw him, was he?'

'No—as mad as a hatter, as far as I could see.'

'Well?'

'Oh, he had his knife into me then right enough, but—'

"But" me no "buts," laughed Daphne. 'I've made my first point; there was one person with his knife into you. Whether he was sane or not doesn't enter into the question. Now then, how do you account for the policeman's tunic being in the car?'

'Oh, that's easily explained. The last performance of the play, you remember, was a week ago last Saturday. Well, after it was over, I pitched it into the car and took it home with me. I was spending the week-end with the parent birds at Hawkstane, and drove straight there from the Stronachs' house.'

'In "Black Maria"?''

'Yes, it was the last time the old girl was used, except that I brought her into Sinton's on the Monday morning. I had meant to take the tunic back to old Stick-in-the-mud's—what's his name?—the fellow who'd hired the beastly thing out to me—on my way to the office, but forgot all about it and left it in the car.'

'Did anybody know you'd left it there? Julian or anyone else?'

'Nobody, and certainly not Julian. I am sure I didn't mention the fact to anyone; it had gone clean out of my head.'

'I see. Well now, old boy, what were you doing and where were you at noon last Saturday?'

'At the time the car was stolen? Let's see. I was at the office till about half-past eleven, and on the way to my digs, bought some baccy, had my hair shingled, and—er—and thought about you. Nothing out of the ordinary in that.'

Daphne ignored the last remark completely. 'Did you meet anyone you knew on the way to your digs?' she asked.

'Not that I remember. I'm not in the habit of spotting any outsiders when my thoughts are fixed on you.'

'That's a pity.'

'Why?'

'Because you may be run over one of these fine days—like Dad, who also never looks where he's going. Besides, there's the question of an *alibi*; you ought to think—'

'Well, what price the tobacconist and the hairdresser? Like Brutus, they're both honourable men and exceedingly respectable—especially the hairdresser.'

'Nigel, don't be idiotic. This is a serious matter.'

'I know it is, worse luck! Anyway, you may take it from me that I did not remove the car.'

'I do,' said Daphne, and then sat silent for a while.

'Look here, Nigel,' I butted in, seizing my opportunity. 'I believe I've hit on a solution of the mystery. It seems fairly obvious that the fellow who abstracted the car must have the misfortune to bear some sort of resemblance to you, doesn't it? If so, it's up to us to rout the beggar out. I'll tell Pittendrieck—er—by the way, what did Pittendrieck say to you when the car and the tunic were identified?'

'It wasn't so much what he said as the nasty way he said it,' returned Nigel, somewhat lugubriously. 'Before all the other fellows, too—curse him! Wanted to know what explanation I had to give? Well, naturally, I was rather flabbergasted by the whole situation, and no doubt showed it a bit, until Kilgour or Ronnie Malcolm—one of

them, anyway—told him to dry up. Kilgour—yes, it was Kilgour—pointed out with extreme politeness that the mere discovery of the car and the tunic and the helmet—I forgot to mention the helmet—didn't amount to much; that he and all the other fellows there were prepared to swear to the godly, righteous, and sober life I had always lived; and that until Julian was found, dead or alive, any accusation—veiled or otherwise—against anybody whatsoever might be extremely unwise. The old bird didn't like it; got quite shirty, in fact, and the subsequent proceedings weren't as harmonious as they might have been. Oh, by the way, he told me to tell you he'd be round to see you to-morrow morning without fail. Sorry you're seeing so much of him, Uncle Colin. I think the fellow's a swine.'

'Well, Nigel, you can't blame him if he's suspicious of you,' said Daphne, joining in the conversation again. 'He knows you quarrelled with Julian, he knows you were the last person to see Julian on Saturday night, he knows there was some mysterious visit the two of you paid together, about which you won't open your stubborn mouth, and now he finds your car and your borrowed policeman's plumes sunk in a pond! I ask you, my lad—what about it? Looks mighty fishy, I think myself.'

'It's the most hellish chapter of accidents that could possibly have happened to a fellow,' he admitted, with a grave smile. 'But what matter? It's all in the day's work—at least, not quite that, but you know what I mean.'

'That's just where you're wrong, I think,' said Daphne. 'It's not a chapter of accidents—I'll never believe that. It's a series of incidents in a premeditated and cunningly-worked-out plot with Julian and his mother and the Reverend Mr. Sadde all having a finger in the pie.'

'Rot!' retorted Nigel. 'Sadde, if you like, but not the other two.'

'We shall see,' said Daphne, unmoved by his protestations. 'Meanwhile, what's the next move?'

'To-morrow,' Nigel explained, 'we're going to get hold of as many fellows as we can to comb out the district where the car was found. We'll be starting with the dawn, so I'd better be toddling off.'

'Ah, that reminds me, Nigel,' I put in, as he rose to go. 'you might look in and see Haggerstoun Grice on the way. He wants to have a talk with you.'

'Old Hagers?' he exclaimed. 'Why, what on earth does that fossilized old walrus want with me? I hardly know the man.'

'I don't think you'll find him quite so fossilized as you seem to think,' I laughingly protested. 'At any rate, he's showing the keenest and most intelligent interest in Julian's case, and it may be well worth your while to drop in.'

'Right! I'll look him up.' So saying, Nigel said good-night to me, and then, accompanied by Daphne, left the room.

They must have talked a long while together at the door, for it was getting on for eleven when my daughter came back. She told me she had been doing her best to persuade him to tell her where he and Julian had been on the Saturday night, but had only been well snubbed for her pains.

'He's as obstinate as a mule,' she ended up with a gay smile. 'But I love his obstinacy, Dad. I'm sure it's the right sort of obstinacy, just because he's the right sort himself. All the same,' she added, with a little sigh, 'it's not helping him to get out of the trouble he's now in.'

'Oh, we'll soon have him out of that,' I declared, with a much more cheery tone of conviction than was in reality the case; for I was frankly worried about Nigel—and worried about him all the more because, in the light of all I knew or suspected, I could not make up my mind as to whether I had acted wisely or otherwise in sending him to Grice.

CHAPTER XIV

THURSDAY morning came with driving sheets of sleet and a cutting east wind. These conditions, coupled with the irritation caused by an indifferent night's rest and Daphne's report that one of the housemaids had given notice because nothing that she could do

could please Mrs. Scrimgeour, accounted in some degree for the lack of cordiality evidenced in my greeting of Pittendriech when he arrived. In some degree only, I repeat, because my anxiety about Nigel was a far more serious cause. Neither my ill-temper nor my anxiety were in any way mitigated by all that the detective had to say. He seemed in excellent spirits—which annoyed me still further—as he settled down to tell his tale.

'Well, Mr. Blair,' he said, 'I think I've made a stride or two since I saw you last, and I propose to give you full details of the work I put in yesterday. I suppose Mr. Balbirny has already given you the gist of the discoveries made? If so, I will only supplement your knowledge with a comment or two of my own which I judged it better to keep to myself.'

I told him briefly what I knew, laying particular stress on the answers Nigel had given to our questions and on the probability of his possessing a double in the town. 'By the way,' I asked, 'who reported the finding of the car to you—and when?'

'I was told over the 'phone just before Mr. Balbirny rang me up yesterday by two young women who had been tramping over the hills. They had seen the notice in the papers offering a reward for any information that might lead to the discovery of Scrimgeour, and are making a claim accordingly. I've got their names and addresses,' He paused a moment, and then changed the subject of his conversation. 'By the way,' he said, 'when I got home last night I found this precious document waiting for me on the hall table. It had come with the last delivery of letters, having been posted in Dundee,' He drew a single sheet of cheap note-paper out of its envelope and handed it to me.

The message I read had been carefully printed in pencil and capital letters, and seemed to me to be the work of an uneducated hand. It ran as follows:—'*Re* the death of Julian Scrimgeour. If Mr. Christie Pittendriech values his own skin, he will be well advised to refrain from poking his beak (!) into matters which do not concern him in the very least. Let him learn sense from the fate of his late friend—the undersigned does not warn twice. R.I.P.'

These suggestive initials were made the more hair-raising by reason of the fact that they were accompanied by a rough sketch of a coffin. I gave a sniff of disgust—how I loathed the vitiated atmosphere of suspicion and deceit into which I had in all innocence been dragged!—and returned the scrap of paper to the detective's hands.

'What do you make of it?' I asked sharply. I was in no mood for any gentle dalliance over such melodramatic trash.

Pittendriech favoured me with another of his harsh, metallic chuckles. 'I'm accustomed to this sort of thing,' he replied, giving me a quick side-long glance and impatiently tapping the note he held in his hand, 'and can estimate the threat at its true value. It's just about worth the cost of the paper on which it's pencilled—and that's cheap enough. My only wonder is that whoever wrote it didn't send it to you instead of me; it might have alarmed you a bit more, I mean, than ever it was likely to startle me. But that is not to say that I am not disquieted by what the writer says; if the whole thing is not an effort to pull my leg, then the definite reference to Scrimgeour's death proves that the fellow is in possession of information which, if I had it, would enable me to act a bit more quickly than I have hitherto had the chance of doing.'

'You mean?'

'I mean that I should tell the police that I had sufficient evidence in my possession to warrant the arrest of two or three people on suspicion of being connected with the crime. But, until I know definitely that a crime has in reality been committed, I am hopelessly handicapped, and the arrest is not practical politics as yet. Meanwhile, I'll give you one or two items of news which will interest you, though I'm afraid, distress you as well.'

'I'm ready to listen,' I said irritably. 'All I want to do is to get to the bottom of the unsavoury business with the least possible delay.'

'Your impatience doesn't surprise me, Mr. Blair,' he replied. 'I'm quite aware how trying you must find the suspense, and from what you've just said it's obvious to me that you are too intimately connected with the principal actors in the drama to get that relief to your ruffled feelings which an outsider can obtain from a dispassionate survey

of the intricacies of a very remarkable case. I've met clients like you before'—his eyes twinkled for a second—'and I can appreciate the attitude you're taking up.'

It was wonderful how cleverly this fellow was able to make his path—and mine—smoother by the occasional use of an apt and judicious phrase. For, if I knew him at all by this time, I was convinced that not only was his every faculty concentrated on the solution of the problem before him but that any sentimental or even any kindly-intentioned interference with, or criticism of, his methods was received with the most intense disapproval. Possessing very little real sense of humour (if I read his character aright), he was utterly impatient of anything that tended to put him out of his stride. I am sure he owed his reputation to the brutal skill with which he hurled every extraneous obstacle out of his way as he pushed relentlessly on towards the goal he had in view. Realizing all this, I felt it was up to me to assist him to the full extent of my power by trying to adopt an attitude more in keeping with his own.

'Never mind my ruffled feelings, Mr. Pittendrieck,' I said, with a laugh. 'They'll disappear as soon as your case is cleared up.'

'Well,' he replied, 'the one thing that is quite certain about it is that it never will be cleared up until we have found Scrimgeour or his corpse—the latter, I'm afraid. When we dragged the pond yesterday, at first I fully expected it would be brought to the surface any minute. But, as the search went on and nothing materialized, I changed my opinion and would have been equally surprised if it had. For the men we are up against are no mean exponents of what I might call the artistry of crime. The car in the pond is, I think, a pure piece of bluff; the body may be miles away. For all we know it may have been sunk in the North Sea or buried in any out-of-the-way spot. It may even be still in this town, though I've done all I can to eliminate any doubt about that possibility. Now we come to the question of the car itself.'

I sat up on hearing this. 'Yes,' I said eagerly, 'I want to know your opinion on that point very badly indeed.'

'And it's this, Mr. Blair,' he rejoined at once. 'That

either Mr. Balbirny is seriously implicated in Scrimgeour's death or disappearance—call it which you will—or that he is the unfortunate victim of a chain of the most damning circumstances I have ever encountered in my professional career.'

Though I was ready for it, the detective's answer stunned me for the moment and completely tied my tongue.

'You see,' Pittendriech went calmly on, 'according to his own account, he had an angry quarrel with his friend on Saturday night on the subject of Miss Blair, and I need hardly remind you that rivalry in love has led to tragedy before now.'

'But,' I protested, finding my tongue again, 'it was Julian's quarrel, not his.'

'So he says,' came the imperturbable reply, 'but we haven't had Scrimgeour's version. Please remember, Mr. Blair, I have no personal concern in either of the two men, and I am simply giving you certain inferences which may, rightly or wrongly, be drawn from the facts as I see them. To go on, Balbirny states that he waited nearly an hour and a half outside Scrimgeour's house after seeing his friend go inside. How do we know that he didn't go in himself? If he did, he had plenty of time—he who knew the house so well—to do what we know was done. And then, leaving Scrimgeour in charge of a confederate—I'll come to that later—he could watch his opportunity to steal out and fetch his car to the place where Grizel Lobban saw, or rather heard it. Once the constable, Macmurdo, had passed the house, this he could do in safety.'

'But,' I said, 'you forget he met Macmurdo and actually spoke to the man.'

The detective flashed a keen glance at me. 'How do you know that?' he demanded, with an eagerness that took me entirely by surprise until I recollected that I had forgotten to tell him of the conversations I had had with Nigel and Macmurdo himself on the point. I repaired the omission at once, and: 'So you see,' I ended up, 'they each corroborated the other's story, and your case is weakened to that extent.'

'Mr. Balbirny has a warm defender in you, Mr. Blair. But I'm not accusing him, I say again; indeed, I'm sorry

he's been landed in this awkward fix. But I do not think my case has been noticeably weakened by what you've said. The fact that the two men met wouldn't prevent Balbirny bringing round his car—he'd simply to wait a little longer till Macmurdo was out of the way. Then with the help of his confederate all he had to do was to get Scrimgeour into the car, and drive him off to a deserted spot—a deserted spot, mind you, with which he himself was quite well acquainted.'

'All very well, I said; 'but, granted for the sake of argument that Balbirny was capable of such a foul deed, do you think he'd have been so incredibly foolish as not only to use his own car but to take it in the very direction he would obviously wish to avoid?'

'Oh, I don't imagine that the deed was premeditated for a moment. But, supposing something happened during that hour and a half which necessitated some such urgent step, then it was easier for Mr. Balbirny—indeed it was his only chance at that hour of the night—to use his own car instead of somebody else's. And as regards the direction taken, well, in the excitement of the moment he took the way he knew best. And we know that a car passed the Haymarket, going along the Dalry Road, shortly after three.'

'But why run the car into a pond? Why not bring it back here or take it to his own home?'

'Because his one idea would have been to get rid of it. Doubtless, he may have thought the pond was deeper than it turned out to be.'

'But, granted always that your fantastic tale is true, what of Scrimgeour's body? Wouldn't it have been wiser for Balbirny to have left it in the car, so that it might have appeared that Julian in his madness had driven himself into the pond and drowned himself therein?'

'Possibly. It would all depend on whether Scrimgeour was still alive when the pond was reached. If not, then a *post mortem* examination would have revealed the fact that he had certainly not committed suicide. I suspect he was dead before the pond was reached, and that the culprit disposed of the body by concealing it in a conveniently adjacent morass. As I said before, Mr. Blair, this is all

pure supposition, but supposition that fits in with such facts as we know. You may ask how Mr. Balbirny got back to his rooms if he hadn't the use of his car? I may say that I've been round to his rooms and interviewed his landlady on the subject of his movements that Saturday night. She says that he was certainly in bed when she called him at the usual hour on Sunday morning, but she could not say at what hour he had come back to the house. When I asked her what was the condition of the clothes he had been wearing, she told me—and this is an important point—that his trousers especially were simply coated with mud.'

'Yes, but that would be explained by the rainy night and the fall he had just before he turned into the Crescent.'

'Ah, Mr. Blair, again we have only his statement regarding the fall. But he certainly slept in his bed that night. Now, I suggest that it is quite on the cards that he himself had left the car long before it was sent hurtling into the pond—by his confederate. He may indeed, for all we know, have left it soon after it passed the Haymarket. Now, as to the confederate. Well, if we assume that Balbirny was one of the two men who were seen dragging Scrimgeour along, it is obvious he was taking the part of the policeman, because the other was a small man who possibly wore a moustache. Now does that description suggest anybody particularly interested in the case to your mind?'

'Good God!' I exclaimed, 'you don't mean Haggerstoun Grice? Why, man, only last night I sent Balbirny along to see him.'

'What?'—the detective rapped the word out excitedly, but rapidly changed his tune—'What made you do that?' he asked, in calmer tones.

'Well, Grice said he liked Balbirny and wanted to see him. On the other hand, Balbirny gave me to understand that he hardly knew Grice and was frankly bored at the idea of going.'

'Of course. If my notion is correct and the two have been working together, Mr. Balbirny would naturally try and give you such an impression. I don't say I'm right in this supposition, but it all fits in with what we know. Now, can you tell me why Grice spent an hour and a half in Scrimgeour's house yesterday?'

I gave a start—I had forgotten that the man was being so carefully watched. 'He said he wished to examine Julian's rooms,' I replied quietly, 'and, in accordance with your own instructions, I placed no impediment in his way. I suppose you knew as well that Balbirny had visited him last night?'

'Oh, yes. They spent two hours together. Now, Mr. Blair, you'll no doubt be anxious to know why I am suspicious about Mr. Grice. Well, largely because I have been aware for at least a year that he has been living a double life—a kind of Jekyll and Hyde existence, you know, with the nobler side of it shown to his respectable friends and acquaintances and the baser side hidden from the light of day. I only discovered this baser side by pure chance; but you will understand that my profession gives me certain opportunities which are denied to ordinary folk of poking my beak—to quote our anonymous friend—into matters with which I have no direct concern but which turn up as side issues during one or other of my investigations. You will, perhaps, remember the de Montville case?'

'Yes, quite well.' De Montville was a blackguard now serving a term of seven years' penal servitude for arson and attempted murder amongst other minor crimes. His assumed name was the least fraudulent thing about him.

'Well,' Pittendriech continued, 'I was engaged in that case on behalf of Mr. Cantax, whose house was burned down, and much of the circumstantial evidence I obtained pointed in the direction of its being Mr. Grice's hand that actually set fire to the house.'

'But,' I objected, 'if this were so, why didn't the fact come out in court?'

Pittendriech looked at me with a sort of pitying wonder. 'Why, Mr. Blair,' he said, 'you as a lawyer must know that whatever may come out in court is frequently only an infinitesimal fraction of what might have come out if all the truth had been known. De Montville got his deserts right enough, even though I believe he was wrongfully convicted on the arson charge. It was proved that he had a motive for committing that crime—the destruction of certain incriminating documents—and this fact

together with some suspicious circumstances and the rest of the record against him, was enough to settle his hash. But I am almost certain that Grice was the real culprit. He, also, desired to get hold of an awkward document that Cantax wouldn't hand over at the price offered. Cantax was a scoundrel himself, of course, but that is not the point. The point is that once a man has succumbed to temptation and has committed any sort of crime successfully he is apt under similar provocation to commit the same crime again. Now, I surmise that Grice in some way or other had found out that Scrimgeour and I were in touch with one another, and it's quite on the cards that he likewise discovered something about the contemplated book. I wish to heaven I'd refused to have anything to do with the beastly thing!

'Does that mean that Grice knew that you suspected him of having done this thing and was afraid that you might have given him away to Scrimgeour?'

'I think it means more; I think it means that Grice knew I *had* given him away to Scrimgeour—which is true—but only, I may say, on condition that Scrimgeour treated the information as being strictly confidential—as I'm sure you will yourself, Mr. Blair, until I gave you permission to speak.'

I nodded gravely; for the moment I was so taken aback by the detective's disastrous revelations that I didn't know what to say, whatever might happen later on.

'As a matter of fact,' Pittendriech went on, 'Grice's name slipped out of my mouth quite by accident when we were discussing a very interesting question. Scrimgeour asked me if I had personally come into contact with many people who were deliberately leading a Jekyll and Hyde existence. I told him I had, and instanced Grice as a typical example. I had given Scrimgeour a shock or two in the course of our talks, but never one so great as this. He utterly refused to believe the tale—naturally I had given it in far greater detail than I have to you—and I am wondering now whether he may have been so foolish as to have tried to find out from Grice himself what truth there was in it. If so, then from that moment he went in peril of his life. I say this with a sense of real responsibility, because there is no more dangerous person

living than a man like Grice who goes always in fear that his sins be found out.'

'Quite so; I see that. But, even granted that Scrimgeour had done all you surmise, the destruction of his papers by burning would have been of no use to Grice. He would still have had to fear the knowledge that was in Scrimgeour's head.'

'Exactly. Therefore, before he knew where he was, he would be forced to commit the greater crime for his own safety.'

'Well, I find it as difficult to believe as Scrimgeour did. And for the life of me, I can't see how Balbirny has become mixed up with Grice.'

'Yes, that's a point which worried me until I hit on a possible solution. It is conceivable, at any rate, that whichever of them first got into Scrimgeour's house was disturbed by the sudden appearance of the other. If that was so, then neither of them would be in a position to explain his presence without fully confessing its true cause.'

'You have an answer for my every objection, Mr. Pittendriech,' I said, with a kind of dull despair in my voice, 'but I can't help thinking there must be some more feasible explanation if only we could find it. I'm convinced you're on the wrong track. What about Sadde?'

'Sadde? Oh, he's in it right enough, though how he comes in I'm not as yet prepared to say.' Here Pittendriech took a small, dark-blue plush case out of his waistcoat pocket, opened it, and exhibited before me a handsome diamond ring. 'That half-hoop,' he went on, 'was removed by one of my smartest assistants from Sadde's desk this morning, and has been—shall I say?—borrowed by me for purposes of identification. I propose to show it to Mrs. Scrimgeour before I go.'

'You think it's one of the two stolen?'

'From her description I should say there's no doubt about it. But you must remember there's always the possibility that the theft of the rings had no connexion with the more serious crime.'

'Sadde hadn't the two by any chance?'

'Not as far as I know; that's the only one my man found. Now, Mr. Blair, I've been making one or two

other inquiries, and I've learned that Grice was away from home on Saturday night. Where he was I have, unfortunately, no idea, but the point is not without importance. When I've consolidated my position a bit more firmly, he will be asked to explain his movements on that night. I can't speak yet, and the longer I maintain silence is all to the good. He may be forced to show his hand purely from a feeling of suspense.'

'And you expect me to go on lulling him into a sense of security?'

'If you will. I know it's an ungrateful task for you, but I'll promise you this in return. When I've got my chain of evidence more complete, at any rate so far as Mr. Balbirny is concerned, I'll give him every chance of exculpating himself in your presence before proceeding to carry out what may come to be my duty. I can't make you a fairer offer than that.'

'No,' I agreed, with extreme cordiality, 'you can't. I'm grateful to you for that.'

'Now, one question more, and then I'd like to see Mrs. Scrimgeour. When Mr. Balbirny was describing his movements on Saturday morning to you, did he happen to mention that he had cashed a cheque at his bank for five hundred pounds in five £100 Bank of England notes?'

'No.'

'Well, he did, and I know the money went into the bottomless pocket of Mrs. Stingerson on Saturday night. I have been to see her again, and have pressed her hard to say on whose account the money was paid in. But she was in her most impish mood and would make no other remark but that I could take my choice of either man—and be damned to me. I offered her twenty-five pounds down to tell me the truth, but all she did was to flourish the notes in my face and tell me she'd enough to be going on with. When her supplies were finished, she jeered, she would be glad for me to call again. Now, Mr. Blair, is it likely that even so good a fellow as you say Mr. Balbirny is would be altruistic enough to pay up such a large sum of money to shield his friend—especially after that friend had just had the devil of a quarrel with him?'

I pondered this question deeply in my mind before

replying. Whatever my inmost convictions of Nigel's probity might be, there was no getting over the fact that he himself had alluded to his depleted income and that Mrs. Scrimgeour had hinted to Daphne that he was not the clean-minded youth we had been sure he was. I could not decide whether or not I should mention these two points to Pittendriech. In the end I temporized. 'A man of the world,' I said, 'could only answer your question in the negative. But so great is my personal trust in Balbirny that I would stake my last penny on his good faith.'

The detective greeted this assertion with a grunt of polite but rather scornful unbelief. 'It is not easy to shake your convictions, Mr. Blair,' he returned, 'and if I may be allowed to say so, I honour you for your splendid loyalty. Almost you persuade me to side with you, but not quite. Any way, until we have found Scrimgeour's body, I don't feel I am justified in taking any drastic steps in advising the arrest of any of the men I have reason to suspect. You can't convict anybody of murder until you produce the corpse.'

'And there is still the faintest glimmer of hope that Scrimgeour may be alive, isn't there?' I asked.

'So faint,' he smiled derisively, as it seemed to me, 'that it is almost invisible. Now, I should like to see Mrs. Scrimgeour,' he added, 'if it's convenient for me to do so before I go.'

I pressed the knob of the bell, and instructed the waitress to ascertain whether such an interview was possible. In a short time she was back to say that the lady would see the detective in the drawing-room. He got out of his chair and, promising to return and give me full details of the result of his mission, left the room at once. In less than ten minutes afterwards I was placed in possession of every word the miserable woman had seen fit to speak.

'I lost no time,' said Pittendriech, with a look of high good-humour, 'in confronting her with the ring and asking her if it were one of the two she had missed. I saw her eyes sparkle with joy at the sight of it, and without the slightest hesitation she admitted that it was. Then I inquired of her whether she was prepared to hazard a guess

as to where it had been found. She was not so quick over her answer this time, though, when it came, it nearly knocked me on to my beam ends. I'll bet you a sovereign, Mr. Blair, you won't guess right off the name of the man she first accused.'

'I'll bet you a sovereign that, whoever it was, it was not the Reverend Mr. Sadde,' was my retort to this.

'That's true enough,' Pitterdrieck retorted. 'No, it wasn't the parson. It was Mr. Nigel Balbirny.'

'Nigel?' I gasped. 'Impossible! The woman's an out-and-out liar.'

'Of course,' agreed Pittendrieck, with a readiness that came as a great relief and a great delight to me. 'I convicted her out of her own mouth. "No, no," I said, "that won't do. The ring was found in your friend Mr. Sadde's desk. How d'you account for that?" She said she couldn't account for it except by suggesting that Mr. Balbirny had secreted it there for some evil purpose of his own. When I asked her to be a bit more explicit, she could only suppose that he had done it with the idea of compromising the good man still further in the eyes of those who hated him. I told her this was all moonshine, and insisted on knowing the truth. In the end she assured me to the accompaniment of many unavailing tears and protestations that she had given the ring to Sadde herself as a small token of her regard. To this assertion she stuck through thick and thin, saying she had made a mistake when she had stated that two rings had been taken on the night of the burglary. As I think I said before, if ever she gets into the witness-box, she'll have the devil of a time of it—and may I be there to see.'

'Serve her right, too,' I said. 'Of course, it's Sadde who is influencing her all the time—I'm quite sure of that. She's not capable of inventing the yarn about Balbirny by herself.'

'I'm not so sure; there's a certain low cunning about her in many ways. I pressed her hard about Balbirny; I wanted to find out why she was so down on him. All I could get out of her was that he wasn't a nice man and that he hated her son. In these answers I think we may safely detect the guiding hand of Sadde, as you suggest. And I

am beginning to wonder whether there may not have been three men in the house next door last Saturday night instead of only two, as I originally thought.'

'Anything seems possible, but I can at least tell you that Grice loathes Sadde. Only the other day he fled from the house when he saw the parson coming in.'

'Did he? Well, people in his position frequently make a show of doing something which is the exact contrary of that which they wish to do.' As Pittendrieck made this remark, there came a noticeable expression of intense interest into his face. 'Oh, they're a clever lot,' he said, 'and it's a privilege to work against them. I don't see my way quite clearly yet, Mr. Blair, but, tough as the problem is, I don't think I've bitten off more than I can chew.'

He got up, and went and looked out of the window. 'An unpleasant job trudging over the Pentlands,' he commented, 'but I must go and see how the squad's getting on. By the way, from what Mrs. Scrimgeour said to me just now, it's clear that she doesn't mean to stay on here much longer. I don't want to interfere with your domestic arrangements—and I daresay it would be a relief to be rid of her—but I shall be sorry if she goes. She's a commonly useful magnet to attract friend Sadde, and I don't wish him further away than I can see him just now.'

I pulled a grimace at this request, but told him I'd do my best to carry out his wishes. 'I'm a bit out of favour with the lady myself,' I explained, 'but I'll see what my daughter can do. At the same time I must warn you that Miss Blair is getting just a wee bit fed up with our unwelcome guest, and so are the servants.'

'Is that so?' he laughed. 'Well, I'm not surprised, though I thought I understood that Miss Blair was, if anything, not unkindly disposed towards Mrs. S.'

'Ah, that was before the lady began to cast aspersions on Balbirny's character.'

'She's done that, has she? And to your daughter herself? Well, what with that young man in trouble himself and Mrs. Scrimgeour running him down into the bargain, I reckon Miss Blair will pretty soon make up her mind as to whether she cares for him or not. For my

experience of life has at least taught me this, Mr. Blair, that, once a woman is really in love with a man, he can more or less break every commandment in the Decalogue with impunity so far as she is concerned, though woe betide the rash and unfortunate individual who would dare to criticize his deeds. But detectives have—or should have—nothing to do with love. Its existence so frequently complicates the work they have to carry out. For instance, Miss Blair—granted she is honestly devoted to Mr. Balbirny—can have nothing but a dislike—to put it mildly—for me. She is confusing, as I think you have done yourself,—here he smiled grimly—‘my public work with my private opinions. Which comes a little hard on a fellow who has what at best can be described as painful and ungrateful duties to perform.’

Having delivered himself of this remarkable statement, he betook himself quickly out of the room. And I was left to ponder over this *apologia pro vita sua*, which, because of its unexpectedness, had an undeniable effect on me. There was no blinking the fact that it contained at least a modicum of truth.

CHAPTER XV

IT was not many minutes after Pittendriech's departure that Daphne came smiling into the room.

‘Why the mournful brow?’ she asked, scanning the feature in question with an expression of comic despair. ‘Cheer up, old thing,’ she went on gaily, ‘I bring you a little glint of sunshine on this foulest of all foul days. Effie has just intimated to me with all due ceremony that it is her intention to remove herself—bag and baggage and all—to Number Eight immediately after lunch.’

It was with a further contraction rather than with a relaxation of the mournful brow that I greeted her joyous statement. ‘Confound the woman and all her works!’ I exclaimed. ‘Why the deuce can't she stay where she is?’

Daphne regarded me this time with a look of mock concern, 'Is the jolly old paternal brain just a trifle touched?' she inquired, with a charming assumption of anxiety. 'Sorry I spoke, but I thought I should verily be lifting a little of its load from your sad and sorrowing mind.'

'Oh, don't think I wouldn't be glad to see Effie's back,' I said, feelingly. 'There's nothing would please me more, but Pittendriech has just begged me to make every effort to keep her in the house. His argument—and there's some weight behind it—is that she acts as a kind of magnet for Sadde, and at all costs he wants to keep an eye on that hoary old philanderer.'

Daphne's face fell on hearing my explanation. 'Confound Pittendriech and all his works!' She echoed the form of my words with equal strength of feeling. 'Why the—er—deuce can't he do his own dirty work without roping decent people in to help him?'

This pertinent question gave me an opportunity of laying the whole case as outlined by the detective before her, and I took full advantage of the chance. It seemed to me that not only was she, as a person peculiarly interested in the case, entitled to know all that was going on, but that, as a girl of sound common sense, she was eminently capable of judging the whole matter with that subtle feminine logic which no mere man can afford either to disregard or—much less—to despise. Perhaps, too, in my heart of hearts I was hoping to receive from her lips a downright declaration of her unswerving and inflexible faith in Nigel's innocence of the guilt that might at any moment be laid to his account. For, despite my own intuitive belief in the man, little devils of doubt would keep on chasing one another through my puzzled mind. Pittendriech's disclosures as to the facts, let alone the deductions he had drawn from them, were of the most damning nature, and certainly Nigel's silence, however justified and justifiable it might be, was doing anything but advance his cause. I was not disappointed in my hope, for, after I had brought my story to an end with an allusion to the detective's last unexpected remark, Daphne at once responded to my silent appeal.

'Dad,' she said, and I have seldom seen her so deeply

moved, 'if you and Nigel himself were to go down on your bended knees and implore me to believe that he had had a hand in the disaster that has overtaken Julian, I should—much as I love you both—tell you that you were, both of you, liars of the very deepest dye. And I should have reason as well as faith for my conviction. Faith you can't describe—it is simply there, and you have it, or you don't—anyway, I defy you to analyse it, however hard you try. But reason's another thing altogether—you can say something about that. And this I say about Nigel—that never, not even excepting my own two brothers, have I known a man of my own generation more open-handed, more open-hearted, and more open-minded than he has always proved himself to be. Have you ever known him to be anything else than transparently honest, dauntlessly loyal to his friends, and far too splendidly proud even to stoop to the contemplation of a mean thought? He has his faults—who hasn't?—and very irritating some of them can be, but I'd believe myself capable of hypocrisy and deceit long before I'd believe the same of him.'

She stood facing me with flashing eyes and a heightened colour as if daring me to deny a single word that she had said. Yet, with all her superb indignation, there were tender lines about her lips and a quavering note of anxious sympathy in the deep tones of her glorious voice.

'My dear,' I said, with sudden inspiration, 'I wish to God Nigel had been in the room himself to hear you make your grand defence of him!'

For an instant I thought she was going to break down, for I saw her eyes suffused with tears and I felt intuitively that there was a choking sensation in her throat—a welling up of emotions, not the less powerful because they were normally suppressed. But in a moment she had recovered herself, and was gazing at me as bravely and almost as collectedly as ever.

'Ye—es, old thing,' she said, with the glimmer of a smile, 'it—it was an effort worthy of the occasion.'

'Like Macaulay's description of the trial of Warren Hastings,' I went on laughing, so as to give her time to re-establish her habitual poise. 'I'm all for Nigel myself, as you know very well, but I do wish a misguided obstinacy had not been one of his more irritating faults.'

'Trying, if you like, Dad, but not misguided,' she corrected me at once. 'I think I know more about that side of his character than you, for I've run up against it too often during the past few days not to be well aware of its existence and its strength. When—er—I mean—if I ever marry him, I shall have to take a good deal for granted that he will never deign to explain. If I've asked him once I've asked him twenty times where he went with Julian on Saturday night and what was the real object of his visit to Mrs. Stingerson. And all I get from him is not "I have promised not to say," but "I don't intend to tell you." You know, I'd love to find out, but I love him more for refusing to tell me. In my own mind I've no doubt but that the reason why he omitted to tell us about his transactions at the Bank was simply and solely because he was still shielding his old friend.'

'Yes, I agree with you there, but his silence is playing the mischief with Pittendriech's investigations.'

'I've told him that; it was one of my strong points. But he just consigned Pittendriech to—er—perdition. He simply states that what he did or did not do on those two particular nights cannot possibly have anything to do with Julian's disappearance.'

'As far as he knows, of course?'

'He wouldn't even admit that qualification.'

'Well, the only practical result so far is that he's done himself no good. An outsider like Pittendriech is bound to suspect the man—he can't do anything else. That incident of the car—not to mention the finding of the constable's rig-out—will take a lot of explaining away.'

'Oh, Nigel sees that clearly enough. He said jokingly last night that he hadn't a dog's chance of escaping arrest. But he added that, if ever Pittendriech did attempt to arrest him, he'd find it his duty to give Pittendriech something to arrest him for.'

'What did he mean by saying that?'

'Why, simply that he would promptly knock the fellow down.'

'I trust he'll not be such a fool as to do anything of the sort. After all, the fellow would only be doing what he conceived to be his duty.'

'But Nigel maintains that to arrest an innocent man is no part of any detective's duty.'

'Maybe not, but Nigel won't be the first person to be wrongfully arrested. However, let's hope that matters won't get as far as that. I mean to let him know that Pittendrieck is more of a sportsman than I originally thought. Don't forget he said he'd every intention of giving Nigel the opportunity of exculpating himself before proceeding to take any extreme measures.'

'Well, that's fairly decent of him,' said Daphne, in so grudging a tone that we both laughed. 'Now, what about Effie?' she went on. 'I really came in to tell you that *Père* Sadde called in to see her about ten minutes ago, and is now closeted with her in the drawing-room. That's why she got up so early. I wonder what he's saying about the diamond ring, but I tell you I decline to listen behind the door. Five to one he's backing her up in her determination to leave this hospitable roof, so I'm just afraid our arguments against the proposition won't wash. What d'you think I ought to do about it?'

'Well, you might waylay him on his way out, and tell him I wish to see him.'

Daphne went to the window, and looked out at the pelting rain. 'He'll be in no hurry to leave,' said she, 'he knows when he's well off. But I'll keep an eye on his movements. My aunt! but those lads out on the Pentland Hills will be getting "sair drookit"—as old Nannie used to say. I wish I were with them, though; you know, I've half a mind to go. I should like to see the expression of smug duplicity on Nigel's face as he prowls round looking for the man he has himself put out of the way. He *would* be so well fitted for the part, wouldn't he, Dad?'

'He was bad enough as the unsophisticated policeman in the play,' I responded gaily, 'but he'd be utterly hopeless as the villain of the piece. Look here, you're not serious about going to join in the search, are you? Look at the day. Besides, I'm sure the men won't want you to be there.'

'That's where you're wrong again, old dear,' she retorted, with a smile of blithe amusement. 'It's evident you're totally unaware of the number of eligible followers your

bonnie daughter has got. No, I don't think I'll go, but that's only because I fancy I may be more useful here. I will reason with Effie, for one thing; for another, I will look after an elderly gentleman who can't look after himself. For instance,' she laughed, as the telephone bell suddenly rang, 'I may as well answer that call.'

She lifted the receiver off, and listened to what was being said. Then: 'It's a trunk call from London,' she announced. 'Were you expecting one?'

'No.'

'Shall I take it for you?'

'Yes, do.'

She stood with her ear to the receiver, smiling down at me. 'Yes,' I heard her say, 'this is Mr. Blair's. Who, did you say? Miss Swayne—Miss Susan Swayne speaking.' She glanced at me, her eyes dancing with excitement. 'Yes,' she went on, and then after a little pause, 'yes, Mr. Blair's in the room here. He's asked me to take the message for him—he's got a damaged foot, you know—it's Miss Blair speaking. *What?* You've had a message by 'phone from Julian Scrimgeour? When? Not more than ten minutes ago? Yes—please wait till I get a piece of paper—I'd like to take it down.'

But by this time I was out of my chair and hopping over to the instrument myself. I took the receiver from Daphne's hand, and: 'This is Mr. Blair speaking,' I exclaimed eagerly.

'Oh, good-morning,' came the answer in a pleasant feminine voice. 'This is Susan Swayne. I thought I'd better ring you up at once to let you know I've just had a few words with Julian Scrimgeour himself. He asked me to let you know that he hoped to be back in Edinburgh not later than Saturday night.'

'Are you sure it was Julian?'

'I think so—it sounded like his voice.'

'Where was he 'phoning from?'

'A public call-box at Liverpool Street Station—at least so he said.'

'Did he volunteer any explanation of his amazing conduct?'

'I asked him for an explanation myself, but all he said

was that he hoped everything would be cleared up soon after his return to Edinburgh.'

'Why didn't he ring me up instead of bothering you?'

'I asked him that question, too. His answer was that he simply couldn't face your forcible remarks even through the 'phone.'

'The man's a fool!' I snorted. 'But, look here, Miss Swayne, did he say how he was?'

'He said he was feeling better. He realized he had been doped before the match last Saturday, and hoped that his wretched display on the field would be put down to its true cause. He said that he was working out the details of the plot that had been hatched against him, and thought it would be possible that he would soon be in a position to bring two scoundrels to justice. I begged him to give me their names——'

'The time is up—d'you want another three minutes?' came an interruption in sepulchral tones.

'Yes, yes, confound you, yes!' I retorted savagely.

'Go on, please, Miss Swayne. Did he give you the names?'

'No, he refused point-blank; said it would be better for me not to know anything until his enquiry was quite complete. But he asked me to ask you to let Mr.—er—Mr. Pittendriech—I don't know how to pronounce the name—to carry on as he is doing. He said he was sure that that gentleman must have more than a shrewd suspicion as to the identity of the two men in question.'

'Pittendriech suspects no less than three men,' I snapped out. 'Didn't Julian make mention of one single name?'

'No, all he said was that he thought even Mr. Pittendriech himself would get the shock of his life when one of the names came out.'

'I'm not so sure of that,' I chuckled, grimly enough.

'Pittendriech has already given me the surprise of mine. It will do no good to repeat what he has told me, as Julian is so reticent on the point. But, should Julian ring you up again by any chance, I think you may safely tell him his case is in good hands here. And tell him not to be afraid of facing me or anybody else when he comes home. The idea is ridiculous.'

'I will, if the opportunity recurs. Oh, by the way, he

sent his love to Miss Blair, and begged her not to think too badly of him. He said that, no matter how black things might be looking against him at the moment, she was to reserve judgment on his apparent madness till a little later on.'

'Right ; I'll tell her that. Now, Miss Swayne, is that all you have to tell us ? Are you sure he said nothing more ?'

'Not a word. The whole conversation I had with him must have lasted less than three minutes. He seemed to be very excited, I thought, and anxious to shorten even the scant talk we had.'

'And are you sure it was Julian himself speaking ?'

'Well, I couldn't take my oath on the point. As I say, he was much excited—and, after all I'd read in the papers, I was rather excited myself. But I certainly think it was he. Of course, all he said only confirmed that opinion.'

'Yes, I see that. Well, I'm grateful to you for your prompt action in ringing me up, Miss Swayne. If I may, I'll write to you after we've found out a bit more about the whole miserable business. In the meantime, good-morning, and thanks very much.'

I rang off, and, turning to Daphne, told her all I had heard. 'You'd better let Effie know at once,' I said, 'and we must get hold of Pittendriech somehow or other without a moment's delay. Because, if it really was Julian who was speaking to Miss Swayne, it will fairly upset all his preconceived ideas and plans.'

'You think there's a doubt, Dad, do you ?'

'I don't know what to think, but the presumption is that Miss Swayne's account is true ; certainly whoever spoke to her knew, amongst other things, all about you and me.'

'Yes, that's a genuine touch, I think. But,' she went on, speaking with deliberation, 'we neither of us appear to be much relieved, do we ?'

'At the news ? No, now that I come to think of it, I don't know that we are. I suppose, for one thing, we've become so accustomed to think of Julian as being dead that we haven't been able to grasp the significance of his—er—resurrection. And for another the meeting with him, after all that has happened, is bound to be a bit awkward. But, all the same, I'll be uncommonly glad to——'

My remark was interrupted by the sound of heated words outside the library door, which, following on a sharp tap, was quickly opened by an agitated waitress who introduced Haggerstou, Grice and Father Sadde into the room both at the same time. Indeed, they cannoned into one another pretty sharply as each man tried to take precedence of the other. Grice's face had paled with anger, while Sadde's plethoric countenance was more purple than ever. They hardly waited for the waitress to close the door behind her before they burst into speech.

'Look here, Blair,' cried Grice, 'I wish to know by what authority this—this fellow refuses me permission to enter the house next door?'

'And I, Mr. Blair,' declared Sadde, 'wish you to understand that I acted on Mrs. Scrimgeour's orders when I wouldn't let him go in.'

'I told him that both you and Mrs. Scrimgeour had allowed me to examine Julian's rooms before, and that it was necessary for me to make another visit for the purpose of clearing up one small point.'

'To which I answered that the former occasion was not to-day, and that in the meantime Mrs. Scrimgeour had changed her mind.'

'Or had her mind changed for her—more likely,' Grice exploded furiously.

I judged it time to intervene. 'Gentlemen,' I interposed, 'this isn't a vestry meeting, nor yet a parliamentary debate.'

'No,' laughed Daphne, backing me up, 'but it's "an awful scene in the House"—as the papers say—all the same.'

Grice turned to her at once. 'I apologize, my dear,' he said, with a disarming smile, 'for so far forgetting myself as to behave like a—er—emotional partisan with you in the room.' Then he swung round towards me. 'Sorry, Blair,' he went on, 'for making an idiot of myself, but it really is essential that I should go next door once again.'

'But surely not against Mrs. Scrimgeour's express wishes to the contrary?' Sadde chimed in.

'The matter can be easily settled,' I said. 'Speaking as one of General Scrimgeour's trustees, I have no objection to Mr. Grice's request, and I shall inform Mrs.

Scrimgeour of my opinion to that effect. Daphne, would you be so good as to tell her this, and at the same time break our recent most startling news to her ? '

As soon as she had gone, I determined to break the same recent and startling piece of news to them. It seemed to me that here was a heaven-sent opportunity for springing an utterly unexpected surprise on the two of them, and carefully noting the result. ' I've just had a talk over the telephone with Miss Susan Swayne,' I said, ' and she reports having had a similar conversation with Julian Scrimgeour in London not a quarter of an hour ago.'

The effect of this announcement was not quite what I had expected it to be. Of the two it was Sadde who got the greater shock ; for the moment it was evident that he was far too astonished to speak. But Grice, though obviously somewhat taken aback, betrayed no particular sign of bewilderment.

' Ah, yes,' he remarked, ' Susan Swayne again. From the first, as you may remember, Blair, I have had my doubts of your Susan Swayne. A hussy, I'm inclined to think, paid by the scoundrels responsible for Scrimgeour's death to drag a red herring across the trail at intervals convenient to themselves. If I understand you aright, Blair, Susan Swayne had no personal interview with Julian—she didn't exactly see him, did she ? '

' No, but she seemed to be satisfied that it really was his voice that she heard through the telephone,' and I gave them a full account of all she had said to me.

The whole time Sadde never took his eyes off Grice. He hung intently on every word the man uttered, and there was an expression on his face as he did so that was indicative of a sort of angry scorn. At first I had thought there was something of fear in it and something of hatred or at least of excessive dislike, but towards the end the predominating feature was distinctly one of contempt. He it was who spoke first when my story was told, and then it was to Grice that his comment was addressed.

' You don't seem particularly pleased to hear that Julian Scrimgeour is still alive,' he sneered. ' I should like to know from you why you're so certain, in the face of all that Mr. Blair has told us, that the poor fellow is dead ? '

Before Grice could answer, Daphne returned to the room. 'Mr. Sadde,' she said, 'would you mind going up to Mrs. Scrimgeour immediately—I'm afraid she's terribly upset by the news she's just heard.'

'Ah, poor lady!' he purred, in answer to this request. 'Yes, yes, I can understand that. If you'll excuse me,' he continued eagerly and as if he were glad of the chance to escape, 'I'll go upstairs at once.'

'I'm afraid, Mr. Grice,' Daphne went on, as soon as Sadde was out of the room, 'that she wasn't in a fit state to attend to your business. Why good news should affect her in the same way as bad I fail to understand.'

'It's because you're just a wholesome, normal lassie, my dear,' said Grice, looking at her with approval written all over his face. 'Well, Blair,' he continued, turning to me, 'if I'd thought there was going to have been any difficulty about getting in next door, I'd have come and asked your permission. That saintly humbug, Sadde, came out of your house just as I was going up the steps of Number Eight, and peremptorily ordered me off.'

'He must have seen you from the drawing-room window, I suppose. Well, Grice, I've no objection to your doing what you like. I take it you've a good reason for your suggested visit?'

'Thanks. Yes, a first-rate reason, which you shall learn later on. I think I'll get a move on now—that's the way you put it, eh, Daphne?—while the parson is administering ghostly comfort to his dupe.'

'Yes, that's the correct expression,' said Daphne, 'and I shall follow your example. I think I ought to get the car out and buzz off after Pittendriech.'

Grice cocked up his ears at this. 'Where is he?' he asked.

'Oh, somewhere on the Pentland Hills, giving a hand to Nigel Balbirny and the rest of them in their search for Julian's body,' she replied.

'With Julian alive in London all the time? H'm! I'll wager my last bawbee they'll not find it. But, Daphne, it's not fit for you to be out on a day like this. I'll go myself as soon as I've finished my job next door; it won't take me two minutes. You simply want him to be told about this London news, don't you?'

'Yes, but why should you go? I don't mind the weather a bit.'

'Well, I should rather like to see the fellow myself. Yes, I'll go,' he added, almost as if he were encouraging and bracing himself to make the effort. 'He'll be working the district round about the pond, I presume?'

'Yes, I think so,' said Daphne. 'D'you know the ground at all well?'

'I won't say every inch of it, but well enough to find my way about. I'll give Pittendrieck your message without fail if he's there.'

I thanked him for his offer, and, after a casual inquiry as to the state of my injured foot, he took his departure. I remember wondering why he had so suddenly volunteered his services, all the more so because I knew he loathed being out in the wet as much as any cat. Whether he was aware that all his own movements were being shadowed by the myrmidons of the very man he was going out to find I had no means of knowing, but I felt I should have greatly enjoyed being present at their meeting. It struck me, as I also recollect, that this venture of his constituted a distinct change of tactics; for hitherto he had, if anything, gone out of his way to avoid the detective. But these were merely passing reflections which made no particular impression on my mind, since my attention was taken up with other matters at the time. Notably with a further interview I had with Sadde, who, accompanied by Mrs. Scrimgeour, inflicted his smug and pompous presence upon me shortly after Grice had gone.

The lady was in a highly hysterical condition, and promptly flopped on to the sofa as soon as she appeared. Sadde seated himself beside her, and employed himself in patting her plump hands from time to time as the interview proceeded—a grotesquely humorous sight. It took me all my time to maintain a suitably sympathetic countenance but at least I managed not to laugh outright.

'Mrs. Scrimgeour tells me,' Sadde began, 'that Miss Blair and you are desirous that she should prolong her stay with you. She does not, of course, complain of any actual neglect, but she feels that her presence is not, perhaps, as welcome as it might be under more normal

circumstances. It is the loneliness of her position that is—er—getting on her nerves, and she thinks it will be better in every way if she now returns home. In this happy solution of a—er—a difficulty I may say that she has my support. I think, now that we have had such excellent news from London, that she will be happier surrounded by her—er—household gods.' He laughed self-consciously, and : ' That is what you wished me to say, dear Euphemia ? ' he finished up, with a ludicrous ogling glance in her direction.

She dabbed at her eyes with her idiotic handkerchief. ' Yes, Aloysius,' she murmured in assent, and all but succeeded in convulsing me with mirth. I couldn't help wondering what her pet name for him would be—she was the sort of woman who had a pet name for all her so-called friends—but decided that she was not so far ' ben ' with him as yet to take so great a liberty. ' You see, Colin,' she went on, shifting her attention to me, ' I feel it was a mistake on my part ever to have come here at all. Naturally, what with your poor foot, I have been able to see very little of you, while dear Daph'—how easily a beautiful name may be spoiled by an ill-chosen diminutive ! —' has had her household duties to attend to, and so couldn't in consequence spare much time for me.'

Mrs. Scrimgeour had developed one characteristic to perfection—she never failed to put everybody else in the wrong. ' Well, Effie,' I said, as soothingly as I could, ' I never imagined I'd think kindly of my injured foot, but that it should have been used as a sort of scapegoat for my sins of omission has made me change my opinion. Seriously, though, I'm sorry you should feel that you've anything in the nature of a grievance against Daphne and me. It's not always easy to know how to take people in times of affliction, and perhaps we all have a tendency to mete out to others the kind of treatment we would appreciate for ourselves. Personally, I should prefer being left alone in my sorrows, but no doubt you feel otherwise. However, what I want to say to you is that, so long as you care to remain with us, we shall only be too glad to have you. In any case, don't you think it would be wise to put off your return home till Saturday night ? '

She was still dabbing at her eyes when I brought this somewhat laboured effort to an end, and apparently found some difficulty in making any ready reply. For instead of answering me direct, she turned to Sadde as if to implore him to lead her in the way she should go.

He responded to her appeal with alacrity. 'I am sure,' he declared, 'that Mrs. Scrimgeour would wish me to tell you that it is only after the most careful consideration that she has come to a decision on the point. She had made up her mind to return home before ever we knew of the good news which has just arrived from London. And that good news, as I need hardly say, does away with any necessity for her trespassing any further on your hospitality.' He paused, and beamed graciously on his tearful companion. 'I trust I have interpreted your wishes exactly, my dear?' he added, with what I can only describe as a saintly smirk on his rubicund face.

'Yes,' she muttered, 'that is what I would wish to have said myself. It will be better in every way for me to go,' she continued, pouting petulantly and favouring me once again with her attention. 'You cannot imagine, Colin, that it is in any way pleasant for me to find myself in daily contact with anybody, however kind, who does not view my contemplated alliance with Mr. Sadde with approval. Your attitude in this matter has hurt me very deeply, more especially since I do not see what right you have to interfere.'

The words were Effie's, but the underlying sentiment in them was most undoubtedly Sadde's. I pondered over the subject for a moment or two before expressing my opinion. Apart altogether from my settled conviction that the wretched woman, if she carried out her intention of marrying the fellow, would inevitably live to rue the mistake, I was faced with the knowledge that Pittendriech was most anxious that the present arrangement should go on. As that seemed to be the more immediately pressing point, I determined to disregard my personal feelings and make one more appeal.

'I have neither the right nor the wish to interfere with whatever matrimonial alliance you may care to make,' I said, 'except in so far as the matter touches me as

one of Harry's trustees. So long as you and Mr. Sadde appreciate the consequences of your action from a financial point of view, that is all that concerns me. If Julian is still alive—and I sincerely hope he is—you stand to lose heavily on the transaction—er—so far as money goes, I mean.'

'There are more valuable things in life than money, Colin,' came her unctuous and rather plaintive reply to this remark of mine.

'So there are,' I agreed, 'and I don't say that Mr. Sadde may not be able and willing to supply them. That is entirely your affair—and his. But, while there is still a doubt concerning Julian's fate, it seems to me that any step in the direction of marriage is—er—rather a heartless proceeding on your part. Surely it would be better to wait until we have some sort of definite news about him before discussing the other question.'

'You will pardon me, Mr. Blair,' Sadde interfered, 'but it's you who are discussing that question and not Euphemia and I. We have made up our minds to marry, and, though we shall regret your disapproval, any such unpleasantness is not likely to influence us in a contrary direction. The point at issue, as I would venture to remind you, is Euphemia's return to her own home. She has already explained to you that she is not happy here, and would fain leave your house. You, for some reason of your own which is not clear to me, are resisting her departure. May I ask why?'

There was something so deep and cunning in the fellow's expression while he was speaking that I could no longer doubt his little game. I knew, as sure as he was sitting by her side, that he had laid his plans for a surreptitious wedding at a registry office either for the next day or the day after that. And I also knew that I was utterly powerless to prevent the ceremony taking place unless I could show the scoundrel up to Effie in his true light. But how I was to do that without either giving Pittendriech's confidence away or rendering myself liable to be had up for libel I hadn't the faintest idea. Something had to be done—and done quickly—if the situation was to be saved. So I tackled Mrs. Scrimgeour once more.

'Effie,' I said gravely, 'you will at least do me the justice

to admit that any opposition I have to your marrying Mr. Sadde is based solely on my wish to protect your material interests. I can get no personal advantage out of what I am doing; nothing, in point of fact, but opprobrium. But I conceive that in your interests I am entitled to ask Mr. Sadde what contribution, if any, he proposes to bring to the family exchequer?'

Here the parson interrupted me. 'So long as Euphemia is satisfied on that point,' he argued, 'it is, I submit, no business of yours.'

'You are aware of the terms of Harry's will,' I went on, ignoring the interruption, 'and it is my duty to warn you against rushing into matrimony without most careful thought—as, indeed, I shrewdly suspect you mean to do. I beg of you not to think of proceeding further until Julian's return. And, for reasons which I am not at liberty to divulge, but which are entirely connected with the investigation into his strange case now going on, I most earnestly ask you to remain under the cover of my roof till he does come back.'

My appeal fell on deaf ears, for Mrs. Scrimgeour covered her face with her hands and had recourse to her habitual spate of tears. Sadde, on the other hand, got up from the sofa and faced me with the most ferocious stare.

'This—er—this persecution has gone far enough,' he declared, 'and I will trouble you, sir, to say no more. Can you not see the harm you've done already without going further with your brutal—er—inquisition? Euphemia, my dear,' he turned to her and held out his hands, 'come with me, and I will quickly place you where you will be beyond the reach of what I can only call the unkind—er—impertinence of a man who should have been your friend and not your enemy.'

After a while she took his hands and allowed herself to be led out of the room and, eventually, out of the house. No other word was spoken while they were in the room. To be quite frank, I was too disgusted with the way things had gone to protest any more; why, I asked myself, should I take the trouble to stand between a fool of a woman and her besotted folly? So I cursed the whole confounded business from start to finish until, realizing the funny side of the recent scene, I suddenly found relief in a burst of most opportune—or, should I rather say?—most inopportune mirth.

CHAPTER XVI

THE rest of Thursday, at any rate until the evening, passed quickly and uneventfully enough. Daphne and I, relieved of the burden of Mrs. Scrimgeour's presence, made merry at meals and almost succeeded in banishing all thoughts of the overshadowing mystery from our minds. It was recalled to them in no uncertain fashion, however, when we were playing a game of piquet in the library half an hour after dinner, by the arrival of Dr. Brett.

'Well,' he said, as he refused a cup of coffee and threw himself into a comfortable chair, 'you two people seem to be quite extraordinarily unperturbed. I just peeped in for a few minutes,' he proceeded to explain, as we looked at him with some astonishment, 'to find out from you what had actually happened. But I'm blessed if I don't think you're more ignorant of the latest development in the Scrimgeour case than I am myself.'

'You mean the news of his having spoken to Miss Swayne in London this morning?' I hazarded, wondering how he had come by the information.

'Good Lord! is that true?' he exclaimed. 'I'm dashed glad to hear it; no wonder you're looking so merry and bright. I *am* glad to hear it. No, I was thinking of the attempt that has just been made to murder Christie Pittendriech.'

I sat bolt upright in my chair, and rather envied Daphne the ease with which she got upon her feet. 'To murder Christie Pittendriech?' I gasped, as the possible grave significance of this startling revelation flashed into my mind. 'How and when and by whom?' I hurried on to ask, 'and is he seriously hurt?'

'No, I fancy not. I'm afraid I haven't brought the paper with me—there was just a small paragraph in the stop press column—but I can tell you the main points. Pittendriech was shot at, and wounded, by an unknown assailant while walking towards his car after his search for Scrimgeour's body had been brought to an enforced conclusion by the waning light. It was too dark for him

to recognize his opponent, who is stated to have fired twice before Pittendrieck could retaliate. That's all I know, and I'm naturally disappointed that you can't tell me more.'

He broke off with a cheery laugh and without waiting for a reply got up from his chair. 'I'm in a deuce of a hurry, as usual,' he said, addressing Daphne, 'but I'd be glad if you'd tell Mrs. Scrimgeour how delighted I am to hear your father's report of her son's reappearance. That ought to do her good. How is she?'

Daphne caught him by the sleeve as he was striding towards the door. 'Why not call in and tell her yourself?' she suggested, with a little ripple of laughter. 'You can then add your warmest congratulations on her approaching marriage.'

The doctor smiled broadly. 'No, no,' he said, 'that won't go down. You're pulling my leg, you—you baggage!'

'I'm not—it's solid truth.'

The doctor's smile broadened. 'All right, then,' he chortled, 'who's the lucky man? Put me out of my misery quickly'—he grinned, and nodded his head towards me in a manner there was no mistaking—'because I can't really stand the suspense too long. Tell me she hasn't got round your father by the time-honoured expedient of nursing his damaged foot!'

'Perish the thought!' exclaimed Daphne, while I consigned him in much more forcible terms to utter oblivion. 'Guess again!'

He thought for a second. 'Then: 'Not the Reverend Aloysius?' he cried.

'Yea, verily, and even so,' Daphne answered, gazing at her old friend as demurely as any a Covenanting lass.

'Well, I'm d——!' he began, and then suddenly changed his tune. 'No, no, I'm not,' he corrected himself. 'It's not I but they who are damned, and serve them both jolly well right, too! Should you be seeing the lady any time, my congratulations still hold good; you may tell her from me that I think it's a perfectly splendid arrangement from every point of view.'

The scorn that was in his voice did not last long—his sense of humour was too great for that. Even as he opened the door he crumpled up with mirth, and we

continued to hear his shouts of merriment as he passed through the hall.

'It's all very well for him to laugh,' I remarked to Daphne, as the front door closed with a bang, 'but I'm not so full of glee myself. There's an undercurrent of such dark mystery about the whole affair that I don't know where I am. And the point that worries me most is the part that Haggerstoun Grice is playing. That he's deeply involved in the plot seems undeniable, and that through his agency Nigel has become implicated as well I very greatly fear. I'm rather inclined to believe that Sadde is only concerned in the matter in so far as his aspirations regarding Effie's money may be taken into account. He is not of the stuff of which conspirators are made, in spite of Pittendriech's knowledge of his past misdeeds.'

'You never know, though, do you, Dad?' she replied, seating herself on the arm of my chair and ruffling my hair in a mighty pleasant way she had. 'I wouldn't trust him as far as I could see him—and frequently not so far. As for Mr. Grice, he's a man who has always struck me as having half a dozen sides to his character. You never quite know where you are with him; he gives me the impression of holding in reserve immense stores of latent possibilities. I may be wronging him—for he has always been jolly decent to me—but I should put him down as an essentially selfish man. It pleases him to pose as being hail-fellow-well-met with all and sundry, but I doubt whether he'd ever really put himself out for anybody. Still, I can't quite see him going to the length of burning Julian's papers, to say nothing of disposing of Julian's body afterwards.'

'But, Daphne, if, as Pittendriech said, he didn't hesitate to burn down a house, he wouldn't jib at destroying a few documents, especially if he had reason to believe that they contained matter much to his detriment.'

'N—no,' she answered, without much conviction in her voice. 'Anyway,' she went on, 'I don't see what you and I can do to clear things up. I should think, however, that this attempt to shoot Pittendriech will pretty soon bring matters to a head. It would fairly put my back up if anyone tried to murder me, and I don't think he's

the kind of man to take that sort of thing sitting down. He'll be bound to show his hand at once, if only for his own safety.'

'That may be true, but I should say he has an infinite capacity for holding his cards until he can play them at the exact psychological moment. He's not likely to strike before he's got his case incontestably complete, and, seeing that he has not yet found Julian's body and that he has still to account for Miss Swayne's unexpected bit of news, that is far from being the case.'

'Yes, there's something in that. You know, I've been thinking over the Swayne woman's message, and I believe that the solution of the whole problem will be found when it is discovered who the man was who actually spoke to her.'

'You don't think it was Julian then?' I asked eagerly. Her calm assumption that he had been impersonated by some one unknown took my breath away.

'I can't say,' she answered slowly and as if she were weighing every word. 'What makes me doubtful is the way the message ended up. I do not think that Julian would either have sent his love to me or have asked Miss Swayne or any other person to tell me not to think too badly of him. It is utterly unlike his method of doing things, and, if he had wished to communicate with me at all, why shouldn't he have made use of the post?'

'You forget that the poor fellow could hardly be himself.'

'No, I don't. What influences me is the feeling I have that Julian has either been killed or disposed of in some other way. I have tried hard to fight this feeling down, but I can't manage to do it. It persists in spite of all my efforts, to such an extent, I may say, that I found it extremely hard to raise what I could only consider were likely to be false hopes in Effie's mind when you asked me to deliver Miss Swayne's message to her. I only succeeded in bringing myself up to the scratch by reflecting that her feelings—one way or the other—were not worthy of much consideration. No, I think we shall find that it wasn't Julian who spoke to Miss Swayne, but rather a confederate employed by the actual criminals to put Pittendriech off the scent.'

'It will be interesting to hear what he thinks of it all

when he turns up. It might be as well to ring up his house, ask how he is, and find out if he's able to come round. You might say that I'm anxious to see him. By the way, d'you expect Nigel to-night?'

'I don't think he said anything about it, but it's likely he'll look in.'

'I hope he will. I want very much to know what happened at his interview with Grice.'

'So do I,' said Daphne, going towards the telephone as she spoke. 'Not that we shall get much out of him he doesn't feel inclined to utter.'

'Why d'you say that?' I asked, as there seemed to be no particular reason why she should have made the remark.

'Why?' she echoed. 'Oh, just because I'm afraid that Mr. Grice, knowing the sort of fellow Nigel is, may possibly take advantage of his loyalty—like Julian did.'

'Yes,' I agreed, 'there is that risk.'

By this time she had got through to the detective's house, and was informed that he had gone to bed. His man explained that the wound in his master's hand, though slight, was extremely painful, the bullet having grazed the bone of the right index finger. He added that Pittendriech had been much shaken by his experiences, but hoped to be round to see me early in the morning.

'Just ask the fellow to inquire whether Pittendriech had an interview with Grice,' I put in hurriedly.

Daphne repeated the question, and after a minute's delay learned that the two had met, and that the detective would give me his views on the London episode when he saw me the next day. So, all hope of a visit from him having vanished, we returned to our game of piquet and were still playing when Nigel put in a belated appearance just before ten o'clock.

He greeted us in his usual cheery fashion. 'Say, old girl,' was his opening salutation to Daphne, 'have you heard of the wild and woolly West film stunt that took place on the slopes of the Pentland Hills this evening as ever was? Featuring Christie Pittendriech as the wounded hero, and—it is whispered—the miscreant who is wanted for Julian's murder as the villain of the piece. A regular stunning bit of melodrama, what?'

'Look here, old lad,' Daphne broke in, 'if you wish to retain my affection and respect, you'll drop all that and get down to brass tacks. Where were you when the firing took place, and what were you doing——?'

'—in the Great War—you would ask?' he took the words out of her mouth and finished the question for her. 'I wasn't even one of the supers on the stage,' he went on, laughing merrily, 'and so missed the whole blooming show. Just my usual bad luck, you know. By the way, how is the old bird? I'm told he was badly winged.'

'A bit shaken, we hear, but he hopes to be at work again after a night's repose.'

'D'you mean he's had to take to his bed? Is he as bad as that?'

'The wound isn't serious—there's a bit of bone in one of his fingers been chipped, but apparently it's pretty painful and he's feeling rather done up. Question is, where were you at the time?'

'I? Oh, miles and miles away from the scene of the fray.'

'Do be serious, Nigel. This isn't a game, you know.'

'Isn't it, old girl? I think you're wrong. It's far and away the greatest game I've ever had to play.'

'The odds seem heavily against you,' I put in here.

'Yes, I know. That's what makes it so jolly exciting.'

'I suppose you don't mean to tell us where you were?' I went on, anxiously, repeating Daphne's question. It seemed to me that Nigel was far from realizing the extremely awkward predicament he was in.

'Sorry, Uncle Colin, but I can't possibly tell you all you'd like to know. I'll tell you one thing, however, and that is that at the time Pittendrieck was hit I was peacefully sleeping in my little warm cot at home.'

'At Hawkstane?'

'Yes.'

Daphne was staring intently at the young man. 'Why were you doing that?' she asked.

'Well, you see, I only got to bed early this morning, and very much doubt if I'll get to bed at all to-night.'

'Why, what are you going to do?'

'Oh, I'm just going to try a little detective work on my own. I've always understood it's quite good fun.'

Daphne gave a little start. 'I don't know that you're altogether fitted for the job, my lad,' she said, with an air of quiet conviction. 'You'll take care of yourself, I hope, and not go blindly off the deep end into any sort of danger? For I tell you I've no great belief in your powers of discrimination.'

Nigel looked at the girl with such a wealth of love in his eyes that once again she failed fairly and squarely to meet his gaze. He gave a contented little laugh, and took a step in her direction. 'Well, my dear,' he asserted, 'you of all people ought to know whether I've discrimination or not.' He paused a moment so that the full significance of this statement might have time to sink in. Then, dropping the note of passion with which his voice had rung, he went calmly on. 'I promise I'll take care of myself,' he said, 'and can assure you there's little or no danger attached to the stunt I'm taking on to-night.'

Daphne was regarding him with widely-opened eyes—it was obvious her instinct of curiosity had been thoroughly aroused. 'Won't you tell me more than that?' she asked in tones that might have wrung tears out of a graven image.

He resisted her appeal, however, though from the expression on his face he found it no easy task. 'I've said too much already,' he replied.

'Well, hardly that,' I smilingly corrected him at this point, as I noted my daughter's rather comical pout of disappointment. 'It's no use pressing you any further—we both of us know that. But if you care to tell us something about your conversation with Haggerstoun Grice last night, we would not be averse to hearing it. I may add, if it's any inducement to you to open your mouth, that Daphne is in my confidence as regards all I know—or suspect I know—about this business of Julian's. Oh, by the way, I ought to tell you that Miss Swayne rang us up to say that she had had a conversation with Julian himself over the telephone in London this morning.'

I shot this piece of intelligence at him with every intent to take him by surprise, and must confess now that I didn't know whether to feel glad or sorry when I saw from his uneasy demeanour that I had scored a palpable hit. For of this I was sure—that my discolours was stale news to him. If that was so, as I argued to myself, then it

must mean that he was far more deeply implicated in the matter than I had thought. I could only imagine from what he had told us of his movements during the last twenty-four hours that he must have been in communication with Grice some time during the afternoon, and was, as Daphne had conjectured, being used by that astute individual for some dark and secret purpose of his own. I was glad to have discovered so much, but at the same time sorry to find out that he had been placed in the sort of hideous quandary which could only be abhorrent to a man of his transparent honesty of character.

He looked most uncomfortable as soon as I had made my allusion to Miss Swayne's message, and his inquietude of mind can not in any way have been alleviated by the eager look of inquiry on Daphne's face and mine. I daresay it was fully half a minute before he made any response. 'Your friend, old Haggars is a queer kind of fish,' he then said, in a gallant endeavour to turn our attention away from the more important point. 'Kept me up to all hours last night hawing away over the most amazing theories of his own about Julian's disappearance. Quite took the wind out of me, like—like a jab in the solar plexus. Not that there mayn't be something in what he says, incredible though his solution of the mystery appeared to be.'

He broke off, and included both of his hearers in one of his pleasant smiles, which said, as clearly as if he had openly declared the fact, that we need not expect to get anything more out of him. I know that both Daphne and I appreciated his difficulty to the full, but believing, as she told me afterwards, that nothing was to be gained by his silence, my daughter launched a fresh attack.

'Nigel, my dear,' she said, in her most winning way, 'I don't know whether I'm acting foolishly or not, but I'm going to ask you once more not to be so reticent. I can't see where the good of it comes in. We're all more or less—more than less, I'm afraid—in the dark about Julian, and I can't help thinking that we might get a ray or two more of light if only you would tell us all you know. Where's the harm, for instance, in giving us a bit of information about Miss Swayne's report?'

From which remark it was easy to see that Daphne had reached much the same conclusion as I had myself. When it is realized that both she and I were aware of Pittendriech's suspicions concerning Grice, it should not be difficult to understand how anxious we were to prevent Nigel from becoming too seriously entangled in the fellow's schemes. This anxiety seemed to me to be at any rate an adequate excuse for Daphne's persistency.

But that persistency, however well-intentioned, was to be of no avail. Nigel, who had remained standing all through our interview, quickly demolished any hope we might have had of its success. 'Sorry, Daphne,' he said, gravely but frankly, 'for refusing to answer any question of yours, but it simply can't be done.'

Then he held out his hand to her. 'Good-night, old girl,' he went on quietly, and just as if the present were quite an ordinary occasion.

She took his hand and held it while she looked at him with the most penetrating glance—a glance from which he did not for one moment flinch. 'No, Nigel,' she cried, 'it is not for you to say you're sorry; it is Dad and I who should apologize for trying so hard to force your hand.'

'Don't talk rot!' he retorted, with energy if not with elegance.

'Right,' she replied, 'I won't.' She thought for a second, and then: 'Are you going to the Stuarts' small and early dance on Saturday night?' she asked.

'I'll be there, if I can. Why d'you want to know?'

'Because I thought I might do penance for my sins, by offering to dance the Yale Blues or the Heebie Jeebies with you.'

This magnanimity on Daphne's part fairly took Nigel aback: it had been one of her perennial complaints against him that he was anything but a congenial dancing partner. 'Done!' he exclaimed, 'I'll hold you to that. I congratulate you on your daughter, Uncle Colin,' he hurried on, laughing and turning to me, 'for she's made the *amende honorable* as splendidly as it has ever been done in history. But then, of course, blood always tells, doesn't it?' And he suddenly stooped and kissed the fingers of the hand that was still grasped in his own. Then he went quickly

out of the room, leaving Daphne gazing blankly at the door.

If Nigel had been astonished at Daphne's suggestion of doing penance, humorous though the idea had been, his surprise was as nothing compared to the amazement she evinced when brought face to face with the gallant homage of his act. She appeared for the moment to be stricken dumb, as with reddened cheeks and a brighter gleam in her eyes she regarded the fingers he had kissed. Then she deliberately raised them to her lips, and looked at me with an expression on her bonny face, in which, as it seemed to me, the sentiments of joy and of shyness, and, I think, perhaps, of reverence as well, were all most happily blended together.

'I'm glad and proud that he did that,' she announced in no uncertain tones. Then she gaily kissed her hand to me, and speedily vanished from my sight.

But she left me with a sense of warm delight, which came as a mighty compensation for the trials and tribulations of the past few days. I went to sleep that night with the comforting reflection that, come what might of future shame and sorrow, her abounding faith in Nigel's stainless honour would be most amply justified.

This sense of warm delight was somewhat damped, though not entirely dissipated, by the arrival of Christie Pittendriech on Friday morning. One glance at the fellow was sufficient to show me that he must have been through a devil of a time. His restless eyes looked hot and tired; his sallow complexion was paler than ever, save for a slight flush over the upper portions of his cheeks; and his listless manner was in striking contrast to the customary vigour and vivacity of his ways. In some undefinable fashion the whole man seemed to have shrunk below his normal stature, and for the first time since my association with him I felt sorry for the chap. He came limping into the dining-room, where I was sitting reading, immediately after breakfast.

'Sit down, Mr. Pittendriech,' I said, motioning him towards the armchair on the other side of the fire. 'I'm afraid you've had rather a rotten time of it since I saw you last. How's the finger this morning?'

'It's still a bit painful,' he replied, as he sat down and

held up the bandaged digit for my inspection. 'It kept me awake most of the night, and I'm never much use if I don't get three or four hours' sleep. But it's some consolation to know I'm a good deal nearer a solution of the mystery surrounding Scrimgeour's case than I was at this time yesterday.'

'Ah,' I said, 'if that is so, you have the advantage of me; for I'm free to confess that I'm more in the dark than ever, especially since hearing from Miss Swayne. You had an interview with Mr. Grice on the subject—what d'you make of it all?'

'Yes, I had an interview with Mr. Grice, or—to be more correct—two interviews.' He spoke in so marked a manner that it was clear he meant a great deal more than he had said. 'We'll deal with the former meeting first. That took place at two p.m. yesterday half a mile away from the pond in which Mr. Balbirny's car was found. He told me he had been charged with the delivery of an important message from you, and proceeded to give me a bald statement of Miss Swayne's story. As you know my opinion on Scrimgeour's fate, you may imagine that for a second or two I was completely nonplussed. But only for a second or two, because it came to me in a flash what had been happening, and I intuitively felt that the very man who was telling me the tale must have been himself responsible for the whole transaction.'

'I'm bound to say I'm inclined to agree with you,' I put in, remembering what Grice's attitude had been when he and Sadde were listening to my account of the incident. 'Did you tax him with your suspicions?'

The detective (who appeared to be regaining something of his natural buoyancy of spirit as our conversation proceeded) gave me a knowing look. 'No, Mr. Blair,' he chuckled, 'I did nothing quite so unwise as that. To begin with, I'd no actual proof of his participation in the scheme; and, secondly, I knew I was up against an ugly customer. It's true there were three or four of my search party in view of us, but they were not very near and there was no saying what risks Mr. Grice might have thought it worth while taking for the purpose of silencing me once and for all. There was no mistaking his look of

hostility, I tell you that. I could see he hated me right enough, but fortunately, as I believe, he feared me in an equal degree. No, I said nothing to alarm him, but contented myself with asking him what his opinion on this latest development might be. He answered me as coolly as you like that he was convinced that Miss Swayne was in possession of the only real clue to the mystery, and strongly advocated that I should concentrate my efforts on her. I may, incidentally, say that my friend Hudson has had her under supervision ever since she came into the case, and he reports that all her movements are quite above suspicion. I didn't mention this fact to Mr. Grice, hoping I might draw him out a bit more. But he's as wily as a badger; I got nothing out of him on that point. However, he made one remark which I have no intention of forgetting—he said he was quite sure that I was wasting my time looking for Scrimgeour's body among the Pentland Hills.'

'You think he was trying to bluff you there, eh?'

'I'm sure of it. So much so that I intend to redouble my vigilance in that particular direction. I think our friend Mr. Grice is getting a bit rattled; otherwise I don't think he'd have taken the trouble to ferret me out yesterday afternoon.'

'He seemed to me a bit peevish and irritable in the morning,' I remarked, concurring in the estimate put forward. And I gave a short account of Grice's interview with Sadde.

'Yes, I knew he'd paid another visit next door. Did he advance any reason for wishing to do so?'

'He said that there was one small point he wanted to clear up.'

'Did he? H'm!—Pittendriech thought deeply for a few moments—'h'm! I think I know what he was after. I'll look into it as soon as I've finished giving you my report. Well now, to go on with my story, my second interview with Mr. Grice occurred much later on—in fact, it occurred when it was too dark to distinguish him at all clearly, but all the same I'm convinced that I have to thank him for this.' And he held up his bandaged finger once again.

I took this calm assertion quite quietly—I had been expecting it all along. 'Nothing that you can tell me now is likely to surprise me,' I commented, 'though I must say I still hope you're mistaken as regards the identity of your assailant.'

'Not much, Mr. Blair,' came the uncompromising reply. 'I've got a little corroborative evidence in support of my opinion. One of my men, especially detailed for the job, saw Mr. Grice in his study late last night busily employed in cleaning the barrel of his revolver and then throwing the tow and the rags he had used carefully into the fire. You'll maybe know the study; it's quite easy to see into the room through the south window, and Mr. Grice had been foolish enough not to draw the curtains as closely together as they should have been.'

This statement fairly staggered me, and I gazed at the detective with dismay. 'What beats me,' I said wearily, 'is the amazing faculty such a man has of disguising his true self. Why, when he was here yesterday, he was just the same as I have seen him scores and scores of times. Barring his show of petulance with Sadde, there was nothing amiss with him—nothing by which any one could have told he was playing a double game.'

Pittendriech gave one of his harsh, derisive laughs. 'Some day, Mr. Blair,' he said, 'I'll hand a little of my knowledge of human nature on to you.'

'I'm in need of a preceptor,' I admitted, somewhat drily, 'but in the meantime what worries me most is that Grice is making use of young Balbirny—the devil alone knows for what purpose of his own.'

'Yes, I know. Mr. Balbirny was not one of the search party yesterday, though he started for the Pentlands in Mr. Kilgour's car. Unfortunately, the man who was watching him took it for granted that he'd remain in the car till it reached its destination—a mistake for which I gave him his kail through the reek—as the saying goes—a mistake which cost us dearly, because we lost him till late last night when he was seen to enter this house. Afterwards he went straight to his digs, from which he has not yet emerged.'

This report disquieted me considerably, seeing that

Nigel had told us that he would probably be up all night. I wondered what could have happened and whether it was my duty or not to acquaint Pittendriech with what I knew. In the end I decided to say nothing. Daphne's unshaken belief in that young man acted as a strong incentive to let matters arrange themselves without any further interference on my part. I felt that the whole affair was on the knees of the gods, and that nothing I might or might not do could possibly influence the final *dénouement*.

Pittendriech was watching me impatiently while I was pondering these thoughts in my mind. 'Did Mr. Balbirny say anything about his doings?' he demanded sharply.

'Very little indeed, except that he had been miles away from the Pentlands at the time you were hit.'

'Humph! Did he give you any idea as to what his movements in the immediate future might be?'

I laughed. 'Well,' I answered cheerily, 'he made an engagement to meet my daughter at a dance at Mrs. Stuart's in Mansfield Gardens to-morrow night.'

Pittendriech seemed interested and yet annoyed at this remark. 'He's taking things coolly enough, too,' he said, with considerable emphasis. 'I'll have an awkward question or two to put before him once Scrimgeour's body has been found. Oh, I'm not forgetting my promise to you, Mr. Blair,' he continued, waving aside the interruption I had intended to make on that very point, 'and I'll give him every chance of exonerating himself in your presence before I'm compelled to strike. But, I tell you, things are looking black for him.'

'They may be,' I retorted. 'but, like my daughter who said that even if he were to go down on his knees and beg her to believe him guilty of any sort of crime she couldn't do it, I have an implicit faith in his integrity.'

Pittendriech regarded me with an expression almost of pity and regret, as if he were sorry to have the painful task of destroying another of my fond illusions. 'What little I have seen of Mr. Balbirny I have liked,' he said, 'and I heartily hope I shall be ultimately able to endorse your high opinion of the man. So far as I'm concerned, I assure you he shall have fair play, but you will not misunderstand me when I say that my professional

reputation is always at stake—and peculiarly so in this case.'

'No, I quite see your point,' I agreed cordially, and then promptly changed the subject. 'Mrs. Scrimgeour, aided and abetted by Sadde, insisted on returning home yesterday,' I announced, 'and I'm very much afraid that the miserable woman is bent on rushing into a misguided matrimonial alliance with that double-dyed old humbug, which she can only live to repent.'

'D'you mean that they intend to be married almost at once?'

'Well, I can't say for certain, but it strikes me that such a proceeding is only too likely. Can anything be done to stop it? That's what I want to know.'

'You must know the legal position better than I do, Mr. Blair. From what you say, though, I imagine there's no bar from that point of view, is there?'

'I can't think of one. There's no law to prevent anybody marrying anybody else, so long as they're outside the forbidden degrees of consanguinity and are not already married. Is it possible that Sadde may have an impediment in the shape of a discarded wife?' I asked the question as a sort of humorous forlorn hope.

'Not as far as I know, though I believe him capable of any villainy short of actual murder. I don't think he has the pluck necessary for that. But I do know enough about his past career to feel certain that he'll make a most undesirable husband even for such a fool of a woman as Mrs. Scrimgeour is.'

'Exactly. But, foolish as she is, I'd do all I could to prevent her taking him. Have you enough against him to frighten him out of the idea?'

'Yes, I think I can promise to help you there. Not that I imagine he has taken any active part in the plot against Scrimgeour, for the more I've gone into the matter, the less evidence I've found against him. Beyond the fact that he's a charlatan of the deepest dye so far as his profession is concerned, and that he was concerned in the Cork business, about which I've already told you, he's quite a respectable character.' Here Pittendriech gave a harsh chuckle of amusement at his somewhat feeble

witticism. 'But I'll tell you what I'll do,' he went on. 'I'll drop him a pretty direct hint that, unless he gives up his pretensions as regards Mrs. Scrimgeour, I'll make it my duty to acquaint her with my knowledge of his lurid past.'

'Thanks very much,' I said, 'that ought to put a spoke in his wheel, if anything will. But don't delay too long over the job.'

'I'll make a point of seeing him at once,' the detective replied. 'There'll be a certain amount of pleasure in so arranging matters that he gets nothing but his just deserts.'

CHAPTER XVII

THE rest of that Friday passed peacefully, and with one unpleasant exception, uneventfully, away—a kind of lull before the storm. Beyond a welcome visit from Alice Balbirny and another from Hubert Brett, we had no other callers. The doctor removed the plaster-of-Paris bandage from my foot, and expressed himself as being peculiarly satisfied with the result of the treatment he had adopted. He patted himself on the back after the manner of his professional brethren all over the world, and was promptly subjected to a good deal of harmless but amusing chaff by my cheerfully impertinent daughter on what she termed the ridiculous and unwarrantable pose he had seen fit to assume.

Alice Balbirny stayed to lunch, and afterwards had a long talk with me on the mystery, which, whether we wished it or not, was always on our minds. I told her everything I knew, for she had always been a woman eminently worthy of trust, and I considered that, as Nigel's mother, she had every right to a full share of the knowledge I possessed. She listened to my story with an eager intelligence that was as invigorating as it was comforting to me. Hardly once did she interrupt the flow of the narrative, and never at all did she show a trace

of emotion—not even when I was laying stress on the various points that told against her own son.

When I had reached the end of the yarn, it was quite a minute before she made any comment. Then she gave a gentle sigh, and opened her heart to me. 'Colin,' she said quietly, 'it's good to be told that you and Daphne are such strong adherents of Nigel's. I am quite sure the boy will be grateful for all the support he can get, though equally certain he'll never ask for it. He came to my room yesterday afternoon—I was lying down on my bed for an hour after lunch—and curled himself up at the foot of it, and spoke his mind to me as, indeed, he has often done before. He realized that circumstances appeared to be terribly against him, but insisted that it was through no fault of his own. The fact that he had become implicated in the business at all, he said, was just a bit of bad luck from beginning to end. That was all the information he vouchsafed even to me. He reminds me of his father so much—he has all of Tom's rigid code of honour without any of Tom's lack of toleration and impulsiveness.'

I smiled at this undeniably true statement. 'He has inherited one or two good qualities from his mother,' I remarked. 'Amongst the rest—shall we say?—a balanced but kindly judgment of men and things. It's a mighty good fault in the right direction.'

'Maybe it is,' she replied, with a little ripple of laughter which was very pleasant to hear. 'Sometimes I think he's apt to be too hard on himself and, if anything, too lenient towards other people.'

'But such behaviour,' said I, 'constitutes the hall-mark of a gentleman.'

She glanced at me with a slight start of surprise. 'You put it rather well,' she responded after a little pause. 'I don't think I've ever looked at it in that light before, but, when I come to think of it, your definition is wonderfully sound. The unfortunate thing is that the mere acting up to such a creed does not in any way protect a man from misrepresentation and calumny—and worse.'

'True,' said I. 'But for that the man who holds the creed can't in any way be blamed. There's a mighty

crowd of folk who have no such sense of discipline in their minds, and so are ever ready and willing to take advantage of the man who has. You see examples of it every day—especially in a lawyer's office. Alice, I'll make bold to say that, if Pittendriech's deductions turn out correct, it will be found that both Julian and Grice have not hesitated to make use of Nigel in the way I've suggested.'

'I think it's only too likely,' she agreed. 'Of one thing I'm certain, and that is we shall never discover anything from Nigel himself. It's possible he may take Daphne into his confidence, if she marries him—which I devoutly hope she will. But I'm not sure even of that.'

'Well, whatever happens and even if he won't speak, we ought to be able to put two and two together and ferret out all we want to know. I confess I'm curious enough in the matter to take a good deal of pains to work out that small addition sum, however difficult it may be.'

'Yes,' said Alice. 'I suppose that curiosity is one of the strongest instincts we possess, and persists all through life, however hard we try to restrain it.'

'And a very good thing, too,' I laughed. 'It would be a dull enough world if there was nothing in it for us to wonder at.'

Which remark brought our conversation to an end. A talk with Alice always did me good, and I am sorry she has made only an occasional and even then a fleeting appearance in the pages of this book. What an amazing contrast there was between her and Effie Scrimgeour! Both of the same *fat*, both equally well-educated, both married to excellent husbands—as husbands go—both sufficiently well-endowed with this world's goods, and yet what a difference! Alice, sagacious, generous, altruistic, and eminently sane; Effie, foolish, mean, selfish, and with certain traits in her character which, if they couldn't quite be described as mad, had been perilously akin to madness time after time.

The more I thought of the contrast between them, the more did I bless my stars that Daphne's power of discrimination had guided her aright in the decision she had made in favour of Nigel. There is, I feel sure, an inborn wisdom in the best of women which is beyond—and utterly

independent of—all logic, but which enables them to steer a splendidly straight course through the shoals and eddies of the sea of life. And, assuredly, their children are of the salt of the earth.

I have been betrayed into this digression, partly because of my admiration for Alice, whose sanity of outlook at a moment of great stress and strain will be recognized from the conversation quoted above, and partly because her demeanour, when compared with the conduct of Effie Scrimgeour which I am about to relate, shows up the startling difference which existed between the two women in a way that nothing else could do.

To resume the thread of my story, it will be remembered that I said that only one untoward incident had marred the quiet of the day. But, before going on to describe that incident, I must just mention the fact that shortly before luncheon I had received a telephonic message from Pittendriech to the effect that he had had an interview with Sadde, who had assured him that anything in the nature of an immediate marriage with Mrs. Scrimgeour had not even been in contemplation. This assurance, as may well be imagined, had not in any way detracted from our enjoyment of the day's unusual calm, and it was therefore with a greater sense of dismay that we took the shock of the disagreeable news when at last it came.

It was Daphne who got it. We had been playing a game of chess in the library, and she was in anything but a winning position when she suddenly announced her intention of ringing Effie up and finding out how she was getting along. There was considerable delay before she obtained any answer, and then it was the cook who responded to the call. From her Daphne received the astounding information that Mrs. Scrimgeour had left home and would not be back for three weeks. Asked if she knew where Effie had gone, the cook declared that she had not been told, and added that she would feel easier in her mind if she might be allowed to come round and see me.

A minute later she was in the room, and, seated bolt upright on the edge of a chair, told us the following amazing story. She was a stout, comfortable-looking, elderly

body, excellent at her job—as we had occasion to know—but not otherwise of a high order of intelligence.

‘I’m no just vera happy aboot things, ye ken,’ she said, when she had at last been encouraged to start. ‘I’m thinking the mistress is fair daft. At noon the day—I mind the time, for I was just aboot to roast the fowl that she was having to her lunch—that she sent for me to see her in the dining-room. And there she tel’t me she wished me to gang oot wi’ her in the caur. “Pit on your oot-door claes, Martha,” she says, “I’ll no keep you frae your work for mair than a few meenits.” Weel, I drove wi’ her to Mr. Sadde’s hoose—him, ye ken, that’s a Papish priest like—onyway, he’s no a decent meenister—and went wi’ her into his study. And there was the man himsel’ laughing and talking wi Mr. Nigel.’

‘Mr. Nigel Balbirny?’ I exclaimed. ‘Are you sure it was he?’

‘As sure’s deith!’ she replied imperturbably, ‘and there’s naething surer nor that. And syne, before I kenned whaur I was, there was Mr. Sadde saying that in the presence of twa witnesses he was taking Euphemia Scrimgeour tae his wife. And there was she, efter he had finished, saying the same thing and swearing to tak’ Al—Ally——?’

‘Aloysius,’ I prompted angrily. ‘Go on, Martha, woman, go on.’

‘Ay, that’s it, sir—an o’ they Papish names, ye ken. Weel, there she was—the fule body!—swearing to tak’ him as her wedded husband. And syne, they wrote it a’ doon, and me and Mr. Nigel signed oor names at the fit o’ the bit paper. Then Mistress Scrimgeour—or wad she be Mistress Sadde the noo?—gi’ed me a five-pun’ note, and tel’t me to gang awa hame in the caur and say naething aboot what I had seen ava. I didna exactly gie ma promise I wouldna tell, for I was too dumfooned tae speak. I dinna ken whether I’ve done richt or wrang to speak the noo?’

‘You’ve done quite right,’ I cried. ‘I only wish you had come and told us all this before. Are you prepared to swear to every word of your statement?’

She looked rather alarmed for a moment, but soon

recovered herself, 'Weel, maybe no to every word o' it,' she admitted cautiously, 'but the feck o' it's a' richt.'

'Good,' I said. 'I hope you haven't mentioned all this to anybody else?'

She shook her head.

'Well, don't. Now, Miss Daphne will see you home, and you'll likely be hearing from me soon again. Good-night, and thank you for coming.'

As soon as the door was closed I hobbled over to the telephone and rang up Pittendriech. I felt I couldn't in any way blame him for not having stopped this iniquitous marriage—irregular it might be, but under the old Scots law still a marriage—but I urgently wanted to know why he hadn't let me know of the departure of 'the happy pair' from Edinburgh. I presumed they had departed for something in the nature of a honeymoon, as Martha had mentioned that her mistress was to be away for three weeks.

One of Pittendriech's men answered my call, and from him I learned that the detective was not in, and very likely would not be in till Saturday morning. In reply to my inquiries concerning Sadde's doings, the fellow informed me that the parson and Effie had left Edinburgh by car about three o'clock in the afternoon. They were, he added, being followed by another of Pittendriech's staff on a motor-bicycle. This man had just reported by 'phone that they had got as far as Penrith where they were putting up for the night. In accordance with his instructions he was standing by, and would at once communicate with headquarters all details of their future movements. With this information I was forced to be content and, after leaving word for Pittendriech to ring me up in the morning, I rang off myself.

I had no sooner done so than Daphne returned to the room. 'Well,' she asked, 'what about it, old man?'

'What about it, indeed!' I replied.

'Well, if you want my opinion, it's this. I think Effie's insane, Sadde a scoundrel, and Pittendriech a fool.'

'And—Nigel?'

'Nigel? You mean Nigel's double, for I'll swear Nigel was never there.'

'But surely Martha can't have been mistaken?'

'Sinton was, and he has far more brains than the cook. Dad, does this idiotic marriage stand?' she went on eagerly, apparently regarding my questions concerning Nigel as being quite beneath contempt.

'I'm afraid so. Exchange of consent before two witnesses—*per verba de praesenti* constitutes a valid marriage in Scots law. Sadde may register the same within three months on production of a Sheriff's warrant permitting them to do so and on payment of the Registrar's fee of five shillings and a penny piece.'

'Scots?'

'No,' I laughed, 'sterling—and the sum is not exorbitant. But—hold on a minute—if the second witness signed as Nigel Balbirny, and Nigel wasn't there, by Jove, I doubt whether the marriage will be valid after all. It's a pretty legal point for dispute, any way.'

'None of your legal points for me,' cried my disrespectful daughter. 'I think such a mouldy old arrangement should be abolished right away.'

'My dear!' I gasped, aghast at such iconoclastic views. 'Any attempt to do so would set the national heather ablaze at once.'

'I don't care: let it blaze,' she retorted. 'Laws ought to protect fools from the consequences of their own folly.'

'Good Lord!' I exclaimed, 'what on earth are you going to say next?'

'Say next?' she repeated. 'Why, that we must get in touch with Nigel at once, if we can. We'll get the truth from him.'

But all our efforts to find him failed. A message sent round to his landlady and a telephone call to Hawkstane both elicited the news that nothing was known of his whereabouts. Nor, though we sat up till midnight, did he put in an appearance.

The next morning, however, brought a letter from him to Daphne, in which he begged her very earnestly not to forget to go to the Stuarts' dance. 'No matter what distressing news you may hear through the day, don't let me down—I want your ~~help~~ advice badly. If I can possibly get back to town in time, I'll call for you and take

you along. But don't wait for me after nine,' were the exact words he had hurriedly scribbled down.

Daphne read them out aloud to me, and gave a chuckle of amusement. 'Just like him,' she remarked, 'to cross out the word "help" and substitute the word "advice." But,' she went on to declare, with a piquant determination in her voice and a bright sparkle in her eyes, 'I'll learn him! I'll learn him to understand that a woman's help is as a general rule more useful and infinitely more valuable than ever her mere advice is likely to be.' And she treated me to a glance of mock indignation, as if to warn me against any attempt to contradict her considered opinion.

I felt no desire to do anything of the sort. 'He's neither too old nor too vain to be taught,' I replied, 'for which you may thank your stars. But that's all for the future, and at the moment I wish to know where he was when he wrote his letter?'

She glanced at the sheet of paper and then at the envelope. 'There's nothing but a date inside,' she said, 'but the letter was posted in Dundee.'

'In Dundee? Now, I wonder what in the world he was doing there?'

'Buying marmalade, perhaps,' suggested Daphne, 'or dabbling in jute?'

'Do try to be serious,' I protested. 'Have you forgotten that it was from Dundee that that threatening letter came to Pittendriech?'

'No, old man,' she answered gravely, 'I've forgotten nothing. But I've a feeling in my bones that we're getting near the end of all our troubles.'

'I wish I could feel the same, but I candidly tell you I'm not so confident.'

'That's because you're taking things too much to heart. Or, perhaps, it's the effect of having a legal mind accustomed to balance the pros and cons of every case to an absolute nicety. But the detection of crime is rather out of your line, you know, and you ought to be content to leave it altogether in the trained hands of men like Pittendriech who've been at it for years. That's what I'm doing, and I'm sure it's the best plan.'

'Even though each step the fellow takes only seems to strengthen the case against Nigel?'

'Or against Mr. Grice or Father Sadde? Especially Sadde, since we know that he and the man who is counterfeiting Nigel must be working hand-in-glove. That looks jolly suspicious as far as that old humbug is concerned. Besides, even if the case against Nigel does get stronger and stronger, what can you do?'

'I don't know, but at least I don't feel inclined to take it sitting down.'

'No, and I love you for that. It shows you've got a deal of faith in my young man, though not quite so much as I have. That's only natural, seeing that the next time he asks me to marry him—I shouldn't wonder if that's why he wants me to go to the dance to-night—I shall certainly take him for better or for worse.' She paused suddenly, and stood smiling down on me. Then, in rather more solemn tones: 'I wonder what he means by his "distressing news"?' she said. 'It sounds as if he were expecting to be arrested at any minute.' And in spite of her courage, she gave a little shiver of apprehension.

I hastened to interpose a word of comfort. 'That's all right, dear girl,' I cried. 'You know the promise Pittendriech gave me, and, besides, he can't act till he's found Julian's——'

The dining-room door was opened at this moment, so the last word of my sentence remained unspoken. 'Mr. Pittendriech at the telephone, sir,'—it was the waitress who had entered—'and he wishes to speak to you personally, he said.'

I reached for my crutches, and was quickly in the next room. 'Good-morning,' I said, through the instrument, 'is that you, Pittendriech?'

'Yes,' came the answer in sharp, harsh tones. 'I'm ringing up to tell you that we've just found Scrimgeour's body.'

I remember a shudder passing through me as I heard the direful words; almost a physical feeling of sickness, compact partly of horror and partly of fear. Horror at the tragic termination of so young and brilliant a life as Scrimgeour's undoubtedly had been; fear of the consequences which his death might bring. But I managed to pull myself together, and: 'Good God!' I exclaimed, in shaking tones, 'where?'

'I'm afraid the news has come as a shock to you, Mr. Blair, even though I never attempted to hold out any hope that he might still be alive.' There was a more gentle note in the detective's voice while he said these words, but the hard, rasping intonation had returned when he went on again. 'I take off my hat to the diabolical ingenuity shown by the perpetrators of the crime,' he declared—a vicious ring in his voice impinging on my ears—'for they had disposed of the body in the one place of all places where they must have thought we should not trouble to look again. But this morning I felt my gift of intuition coming back to me once more, and in a flash of inspiration I knew where I should find it. All I need say is that I at once took two men with me and drove straight out to the pond in which Mr. Balbirny's car was discovered. We carefully dragged that pond again, and in less than two minutes had recovered the poor fellow's corpse.'

To attempt a description of the state of my feelings at the moment of hearing this ghastly story is an impossible task. I think I stood gazing at the mouth-piece of the receiver in a dazed sort of way, feebly ejaculating the words—'My God! my God!—once or twice, and wondering in an aimless manner, utterly forgetful of what she had done, as to how I was to break the news to Mrs. Scrimgeour. But at last Pittendriech's impatient 'Are you there, Mr. Blair?' brought me up against stark reality again.'

'Yes, yes,' I answered irritably, 'what d'you propose to do now?'

'Well, there'll need to be a *post-mortem* examination, and I'm arranging with the authorities to have it done as soon as possible. Now, if you'll be advised by me, it would be as well for you to be represented at that examination by your own medical man. Dr. Hubert Brett, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Well, if you like, I'll ring him up for you and ask him to be there. Failing him, how about Dr. Craigie?'

'Yes, but preferably Dr. Brett if he can manage it. I'm sure he'll go if he can.'

'Right, I'll arrange it for you. Now, I shall hope to be round to see you sometime this evening—probably at

rather a late hour as I've still a lot to do. Shall we say between eleven-thirty and midnight?'

'Can't you come before that? There are a good many questions I want to ask.'

'I'm afraid it won't be possible. I haven't quite made out my case yet, but it should be complete by then. Yes, I'll be at your house punctually at half-past eleven, and it's essential that I should see Mr. Balbirny at that hour. I've communicated with him myself on the point, but it would be as well if you could also get hold of him between now and then and impress on him the importance of attending to my wishes.'

'But, if I don't know where he is, how the devil am I to communicate with him in time?'

'He's certain to be at Mrs. Stuart's dance, isn't he? You'll be able to get a message to him there.'

'Oh, yes, I'd forgotten that for the moment. But, naturally, this discovery of Julian's body may make a difference, and he may not care to go. And yet I don't know,' I went on, suddenly remembering the urgent request contained in his letter to Daphne. 'Yes, I rather imagine he will be there after all.'

'He's not the sort of man to run away and refuse to face the music, eh?'

'No, by God, he's not!' I retorted with supreme conviction.

'Well, he shall have the chance I promised him of proving his innocence to-night. Oh'—he suddenly changed the subject—'my man, Maxwell, reports that Sadde is still at Penrith, and has not as yet shown any sign of getting the car out. Maxwell suspects the lady's in a fearful state of nerves this morning, though, of course, she does not know of the finding of Scrimgeour's body. I'm sorry about that marriage, Mr. Blair, but my mind has been so full of other matters that I never even imagined he'd take advantage of an old Scottish custom. Or rather, perhaps I ought to say that I never thought he'd be able to convert Mrs. Scrimgeour to his views on any so pernicious a course of action. It only shows how disastrously she must be under his influence.'

'You know that young Balbirny is alleged to have been

one of the two witnesses present, do you?' I asked hurriedly. I wanted his opinion on this point—badly.

The question fairly knocked him out. '*What?*' he exclaimed, with a sort of incredulous gasp which was distinctly audible through the 'phone. 'Oh, the utter fools! the utter damned fools!'

'What? Both of them?'

'Why, of course. Don't you see how they've given themselves away? Up till now there's been no evidence to connect Sadde with Balbirny, but this puts a different complexion on the matter altogether. It means that Sadde is more deeply involved in the case than I had thought, but I've got my grip on him—and he won't get away. As for Balbirny, that young man seems bent on tightening the noose round his neck.'

I shuddered at the idea. 'But,' I objected, 'you forget the possible existence of a double.'

'No, I don't. I've had the whole police force on the outlook for that elusive customer, and nothing's been seen or heard of him.'

'But he must exist all the same,' I persisted.

'Well, for Balbirny's sake, get hold of him and produce him. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must get on. I'll be with you without fail at eleven-thirty to-night.'

I rang off, and sat down in the nearest chair. And there Daphne found me a minute or two later on.

One glance at the expression on my face was enough for her. 'What is it, Dad,' she faltered. 'Has anything happened to—to Nigel?'

'No, my dear,' I said, as reassuringly as I could, 'but Julian's body has been found, and God alone knows what may happen next.' And I told her all I had learned from Pittendreich.

She shed a few kindly and natural tears over Julian's death, and I liked her all the better for doing so. But otherwise she listened to my statement quite unmoved. We discussed the new situation at length from every point of view, but she never once swerved from her constant attitude of trust in Nigel's honour. In the end she brought me round once more to her way of thinking—in spite of all appearances against him, it was impossible not to be

influenced by the grandeur and the glory of her impregnable faith.

After lunch, Hubert Brett came round and gave me a complete if somewhat gruesome account of the *post-mortem* examination. I omit a great many of the unpleasant details, confining myself solely to the main data drawn by the expert pathologists who were present at the examination and whose conclusions were based on first-hand observation. With these conclusions Brett confessed to being in absolute agreement.

There was no dubiety as regarded the actual cause of death. Julian had unquestionably been drowned—and as unquestionably drowned six days before his body had been found. That being so, the only other point on which the experts were asked to give an opinion was whether that drowning had been due to accident or to suicide or foul play.

Owing to the fact that six days had elapsed since death, certain slight marks on portions of the skin of the deceased could only be faintly traced and were by no means clearly defined. But the fact that these marks were discovered round the wrists and the ankles of the corpse was sufficient to justify the doctors in making up their minds in favour of the third alternative. The further fact that these circular marks—they could not be described as indentations or even as depressions—were greater in width round the ankles than round the wrists pointed strongly in the same direction. For it was, in fact, conjectured that, while the unfortunate man's wrists had been tied together by twine, his ankles had been gripped by the hands of his murderers and he himself held under water in such a manner until he had expired. There were no other signs of violence anywhere with the exception of a few bruises which could be accounted for by the game of football in which he had engaged a few hours before his death. And finally, Brett told me, certain internal organs had been removed for chemical analysis with a view to ascertaining whether anything in the nature of poison had been used.

'The fact is, Blair,' he commented, at the end of his tale, 'there's no shadow of doubt that a peculiarly revolting and dastardly murder has been committed. Of course, you know more than I do, and you'll do me the justice to

admit that I haven't bothered you with any unnecessary and inquisitive questions, but there are some curious and disagreeable rumours flying about. I don't ask you to tell me anything now if you'd rather not, but I'm just wondering if you happen to have heard the latest and, to my mind, the most ludicrously absurd *canard* of the lot ?'

'I looked at Brett and laughed. 'If you imagine I'm aware of the identity of the actual murderer,' I said, 'you're very much mistaken. Of course, I know from Pittendrieck the names of two or three people whom he suspects, but up till now he hasn't committed himself any further.'

'Well,' said Brett, with a chuckle of amusement, 'I'll lay you two to one in your filthy Scottish notes that I know the name of one.'

'Done !' said I. 'Who is it ?'

'One Barnaby Fagan, who, I hear, departed two days ago for a conveniently well-earned holiday.'

Brett's totally unexpected answer took me completely by surprise. I had entirely forgotten the existence of Barnaby Fagan, and yet, was it not possible that he might have had a hand in the crime ? He had certainly treated Julian before the match in a highly suspicious manner, and, according to Miss Lobban's story, it might have been the engine of his car that she had heard running early on the Sunday morning. On the other hand, Pittendrieck had made no recent mention of the man, and must obviously have been satisfied of his innocence.

Brett was looking at me with curious eyes. 'I seemed to have guessed right,' he laughed, mistaking my silence for consent. 'Kindly hand over the cash.'

'Oh, no,' I replied, 'It's the other way about. You pay me; or you deduct the amount from your beastly bill. Fagan's name has not even been mentioned.'

'Then it ought to have been,' retorted the doctor, annoyed at his discomfiture. 'Well, has any mention been made of the great Haggerstoun Grice ?'

'Is he a subject of the absurd rumours that are going round ?' I asked, with a view of gaining time before making any reply.

'Yes. Rather queer, isn't it ? Have you and Pittendrieck heard of it ?'

'Yes,' I answered slowly, 'we have. But I think it will be best to leave it at that.'

Brett got up from his chair. 'Right, old man,' he said, shaking hands. 'I shall make it my duty to contradict the same.' And with a cheery smile he left the room without uttering another word.

He left me with considerable food for thought. The one satisfactory item of information I had gleaned from his conversation was that Nigel's name had not apparently been included in the list of those whom popular rumour was accusing of the crime. That was all to the good, and I confess I was not greatly concerned about anybody else. But I did wonder how it had come about that suspicion had been fixed on Grice. Neither Daphne nor Nigel nor I had so much as breathed his name, and I felt sure that Pittendrieck and his men had exercised a similar discretion.

Anyway, after half an hour spent in a vain endeavour to solve that and every other puzzle connected with the case, I decided to abandon the task. I could find no solution till Pittendrieck turned up, and was indeed only adding to my suspense by fruitlessly attempting to do so. If only I could have gone for a walk it wouldn't have been so bad, but I found I couldn't as yet trust myself to put any weight on my foot. In the end I took down Sir Walter Scott's *Journal* from its shelf, and gained something of comfort and courage from a reperusal of its immortal pages. What an example of heroic fortitude in the way of meeting disaster had that king of men set for all time before the world!

But I'm bound to confess that, in spite of Sir Walter, the hours of that Saturday afternoon dragged themselves slowly and interminably along. Daphne and I did our best at dinner to carry on something of a cheery conversation, but the most dismal periods of silence descended upon us from time to time like patches of fog on a November day. She was looking her very best; a picture of healthy, wholesome maidenhood in a costume of daringly contrasted blacks and whites. A vision of loveliness to send a lover's blood coursing like fire through his veins—aye, even to stir the pulses of her father himself. But with all the glamour and the glory, there was an expression

in her eyes at once tender and almost regretful, patient and curiously significant of that power to endure which is the keystone of a noble woman's character.

Leaning on my crutches, I stood with her on the doorstep at five minutes past nine. There was no sign either of Nigel or a taxi, and presently she announced her intention of not waiting any longer for him and of walking along to the Stuarts' by herself. She had not got more than a hundred yards away when a car came tearing round the corner from Cromdale Place. A young man was hanging half out of the window, urging the driver in pursuit of the fast disappearing figure of the girl on the pavement. I saw it was Nigel, and caught his cheery greeting of 'Hullo! Uncle Colin. No time to stop!' as he was whizzed past. I heard also his boisterous shout of joy as the car drew level with Daphne and was pulled up sharply with a painful rasping of brakes. 'Awfully sorry I'm late, Daphne! Jump in, old thing!' he bawled in tones which must have been audible to every householder in the crescent. Then the taxi door was pulled to with a bang, and the car itself proceeded at a more sedate and leisurely speed, as I noted with some amusement, via Rattray Terrace to its destination.

I stood where I was for a bit enjoying the fresh air and idly watching the traffic along the street—two pairs of lovers and a man on a motor bicycle. Then I shut the front door and went back to the library. I should have liked to have had a word with Nigel on the subject of the coming momentous interview with Pittendriech, but felt that Daphne was eminently capable of taking my place and saying all there was to be said. I had an idea that they wouldn't waste much time on so painful a matter, and so fell to musing over the quiet joy which would surely be with them when they came to plight their troth. So pleasant was this reverie that I must have fallen asleep. At any rate, all I know is that I suddenly became aware of the fact that the hands of the grandfather clock were pointing to five-and-twenty minutes past eleven and that I had got over what had threatened to be one of the worst experiences of my life in a manner that savoured almost of the miraculous.

I shook myself, got out of my chair and on to my crutches,

and went and opened the front door. I had previously told the waitress not to stay up, saying that I would attend to her duties myself. Standing on the doorstep, Nigel actually with his hand on the bell-push, were the two men I expected to see, though not, it is true, to see quite so soon.

'You're well up to time, both of you,' I said gaily—gaily, because I felt refreshed by my sleep and because I was conscious that the torture of suspense must quickly be over—and bade them come in.

Half a minute later they stood facing one another in front of the library fire.

CHAPTER XVIII

FOR an appreciable space of time not a word was spoken. I myself sat down, and watched the two men with an eager interest as they eyed each other intently and seemed to be measuring each the other's powers, like a pair of boxers before a bout of fisticuffs. Nigel, a look of resolute determination on his face such as I had never before seen thereon, towered over his opponent, who, though shorter in stature by seven or eight inches, was from the expression of keen intelligence on his countenance likely to prove himself no mean antagonist. And then, before a word had been said, I suddenly noticed to my horror that the former was dressed in a most disreputable suit of 'plus-fours.'

'Good God, Nigel,' I exclaimed, 'don't tell me you haven't been to the Stuarts' dance?'

He swung round and stared at me in astonishment. 'No,' he said quietly, 'I hadn't time to get there.'

'But, man,' I went on desperately, 'I saw you with my own eyes passing this house in a taxi shortly after nine o'clock. You waved your hand and shouted to me as you went past, and then you pulled up a hundred yards along the street and picked up Daphne who was then on her way to the dance.'

His look of astonishment changed to one of utter bewilderment. 'I assure you, Uncle Colin,' he replied, 'I did nothing of the sort.'

'But—but,' I stammered, as a great fear took possession of me, body, mind and soul. 'I'll swear it was you!'

His colour deepened, and he took a quick step towards me. 'Uncle Colin,' he retorted hotly, 'I will not be called a liar—even by you. I tell you once more I neither picked up Daphne nor was I at the Stuarts' dance.'

'Then,' I faltered, 'she—God help us!—has disappeared, even as Julian did.' And in an agony of apprehension I covered my face with my hands.

Nigel placed his hand on my shoulder. 'Steady, Uncle Colin,' he said, in gentler tones. 'I'll ring up Jim Stuart at once, and—'

I shook his hand off my shoulder savagely; it was all I could do at that lurid moment to restrain myself from cursing him to his face. And I verily believe that I should have done so, had not Pittendriech, who had been watching the scene all this time with an expression almost of sneering contempt on his face, intervened.

'It's all right, Mr. Blair,' he now said, with a calm assertion that was strangely consoling. 'There's very little need for you to worry. I was expecting something of the sort to happen, and I took precautions accordingly. When you were watching Miss Blair walking along the crescent—or it may have been after she entered the car—did you happen to notice a motor cyclist passing your door?'

'Yes,' I assented eagerly, 'yes, I did.'

'Well, the fellow riding the bike was Donald Campbell, one of the smartest men I've ever had in my employ. He followed the car, and was fortunate enough to be on the spot just when he was wanted. I have no details of what actually occurred, but Campbell rang up from Kinross just as I started to come here to say that he was bringing Miss Blair back and expected to be here shortly after twelve. So you may set your mind quite at ease.'

'If you take my advice, Uncle Colin,' Nigel put in anxiously but unhesitatingly, 'you'll ring up the police at once.'

'There's no necessity, I assure you,' said Pittendriech,

'The police know all about it already—you're a bit behind the times.'

Nigel looked steadily and inquiringly at me. 'Will you let me ring them up?' he asked.

I thought deeply before answering. My mind was in a whirl of conflicting ideas and emotions, and, as may well be imagined, my reflections were not particularly clear. I clung with all my might to Pittendriech's comforting statement, for Daphne's safety was dearer to me than anything in the world, and, if his statement was correct, that safety was no longer at stake. On the other hand, if Nigel were speaking the truth—and he at least, as I thought bitterly, ought to have had as much reason to be as desperately concerned about her welfare as I had myself—then she might still be in terrible danger. So was Nigel, as I realized in a flash, if the police were brought to the house. Pittendriech could not in that case be expected to treat his man with the consideration he had promised to show, and the consequences to Nigel would be perilous in the extreme. And then a recollection of Daphne's utter faith in her lover came to my aid, and in the end I shaped my course accordingly. I make no pretence of describing the workings of my mind as they actually proceeded at the time, because it would indeed be only a fabrication if I were to make the attempt. Suffice it to say that, as the result of what can only be called a confused process of reasoning, I determined for the moment to keep the police out of the house. I could easily change my mind, if I found it necessary.

'I don't know whether I'm acting wisely or not,' I said, 'but for the next few minutes at any rate we'll leave matters as they are.' And to my surprise I thought I saw a glimmer of satisfaction pass over the faces of both my hearers. 'You wished to meet Mr. Balbirny here,' I went on irritably, addressing the detective. 'Well, here he is, and I suggest you get on with the interview.'

Nigel turned sharply to face Pittendriech, after bestowing a look on me which I interpreted to mean that I should only have myself to blame for not following his advice. In the light of the glimmer of satisfaction which had but a moment before spread over his face I failed to understand it.

'I'm quite ready,' he said. 'Let's get it over quickly.'

Pittendriech got to work at once. 'Well, Mr. Balbirny,' he began, frowning slightly, 'I wish you very clearly to understand that I gravely suspect you to be concerned in the murder of Julian Scrimgeour. I also wish you to realize that, though I am taking an exceptional course in giving you this opportunity of exonerating yourself, your answers will afterwards be used by me as evidence against you. So that you need make no reply to such questions as I shall put unless you see fit to do so. Mr. Blair here, who has every belief in your innocence, will——'

'You can cut all that out,' Nigel interrupted. 'Let's hear your questions.'

Pittendriech's frown grew more marked. 'Good,' he said, 'you shall. Well, I take it you admit having met Scrimgeour some time between eleven and eleven-thirty at night exactly a week ago?'

A week ago? To me it seemed much more like a year.

'Yes,' said Nigel.

'And that in his company you paid a visit to somebody whose name and address you refuse to divulge?'

'Yes.'

'Does your refusal still hold good?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I suggest your visit was paid to Mrs. Stingerson?'

'Sorry, but on that point there's nothing doing.'

Pittendriech's face hardened. 'I know you were there,' he declared.

'Then, if you do,' retorted Nigel, 'why ask me?'

Pittendriech took no notice of the rejoinder. 'Any way, you admit having had a serious quarrel with Scrimgeour that night?' he went on.

"I do."

'On the subject of Miss Blair?'

Dislike of having to bring Daphne into the matter at all showed itself all over Nigel's face. Nevertheless: 'Since you ask me,' he growled, 'yes.'

'He accused you of having ruined his chances of winning her as his wife?'

'Yes, but I'm sure he wasn't sane at the time.'

'That's as may be. The point is that, in accordance

with your version, that accusation was at the bottom of the dispute.'

Nigel looked puzzled. 'My version?' he repeated. 'What d'you mean?'

'Well, in fairness you must admit that Scrimgeour's version, had he been alive to give it, might possibly differ from yours.'

A slow smile spread over Nigel's face. 'I see,' he said. 'Yes, in fairness I'll admit that.'

Pittendrieck put his hand inside the breast-pocket of his coat, and half-drew out a pocket case. But, apparently on second thoughts, he let it slip back and returned to his inquisition.

'After the quarrel you followed him home and state that you saw him enter the house next door?'

'I certainly saw a man going in, whom I took to be Scrimgeour. I would have been more sure of this, had I not stepped on to some small, hard object which slipped from under my foot and brought me down. I lost a bit of valuable time in that way.'

'And then, after waiting outside Scrimgeour's house till nearly three o'clock, you went straight home?'

'To my digs. Yes.'

'Now, if you thought Scrimgeour mad, why did you not go in after him or rouse Mr. Blair here?'

'Simply because I did not wish to disturb either household. I thought that, as he hadn't appeared after my long wait, he had probably cleared off to bed. It was a dashed bad blunder on my part—I see that now.'

'It was, Mr. Balbirny,' Pittendrieck agreed, with every appearance of cordiality. 'It most certainly was. Now,' he went on as Nigel remained silent, 'to come to the Sunday night. Will you admit that you paid a visit to Mrs. Stinergson's then, and handed over to her the £500 in notes which you had received in exchange for a cheque at your bank on Saturday morning?'

The latter part of this question evidently took Nigel by surprise. 'So you——' he began, but suddenly closed his lips with a snap, leaving his sentence unfinished. 'I decline to answer that question,' was the substitution he made in reply.

'It doesn't make much difference,' was Pittendriech's comment, 'because I myself saw you go into Mrs. Stinger's flat, and she has since confessed that she got that amount of ready cash from you. But that again is not the point; the point is whether she was blackmailing you or Scrimgeour for the money?'

'Very interesting,' said Nigel, flippantly. 'Did you ascertain her views on the subject?'

'Oh, yes, and they were not to your advantage.'

'I trust you didn't have to pay through the nose for your information?' asked Nigel with a smile.

The detective bridled a bit at this. 'Before I've finished with you,' he said, 'you'll find it's not such a laughing matter as you seem to think.'

'I'm not so sure of that either,' retorted Nigel, with a grin. 'But get on with it. I suppose you'll want to know next how the pater's old car, which I was seen to take out of Sinton's garage last Saturday morning, came to be in the pond where it was found—with the policeman's tunic, and all that, and why I seemed to be so upset when we fished it out?'

'They are points which require some explanation,' suggested Pittendriech.

'Well, we shall have to defer the explanation until—until, say, I'm standing in the dock.'

'Another little matter you'll be asked to explain when you're in that unpleasant position,' continued the detective, with a chuckle of amusement, 'is your close association with Mr. Haggerstoun Grice these last three days.'

'Surely it's an honour to be associated with so great a man,' returned Nigel imperturbably. 'Or have I been mistaken in my reading of his character?'

'You've been mistaken in that as well as in a good many other matters. Notably, for instance, in having been so inconceivably foolish as to act as one of the two witnesses at Mr. Sadde's marriage with Mrs. Scrimgeour yesterday.'

If ever I saw blank amazement on any man's face I saw it now on Nigel's. Like Martha Scott, the cook, he was literally dumbfounded, and a gleam of hope for him came into my mind as I recognized the genuineness of the expression. It seemed at any rate to prove once and for all

that he must have a double who, as I also realized forthwith, might have impersonated him even before Daphne and myself.

I leaned forward in my chair, scanning the faces of the two antagonists with increased interest. Their interview was going vastly differently to what I had expected, and I was becoming more and more conscious of the existence of some subtle undertone lying hidden below the surface of the actual words they spoke. Gradually, I think, it was beginning to dawn on me that, so far as Nigel was concerned, Pittendriech's suspicions of his connexion with Julian's murder had possibly been based as much on fiction as on fact. I could see that the detective was not quite so sure of his ground as he had been at the beginning; he seemed to be getting more rattled as the minutes passed by. On the other hand, Nigel had himself well in hand, and appeared to be wonderfully undisturbed by the rain of searching interrogations by which he was being bombarded. Had it not been for my lightened, though still intense, anxiety about Daphne, I believe I should have thoroughly enjoyed the scene.

Presently Nigel recovered from his state of astonishment. 'You don't mean to tell me that she's been and gone and married the holy old bird?' he gasped.

'Very clever, Mr. Balbirny, very clever indeed,' snapped Pittendriech. 'But, unfortunately for you, the second witness present is prepared to swear that you were there.'

'The second witness? I'd forgotten him. What's his name? Do I know him?'

Pittendriech laughed sardonically, and I couldn't resist smiling myself. 'The second witness, Nigel,' I chimed in, 'was Martha Scott, Effie's old cook.'

'Good Lord!' he exclaimed, 'she must have been bribed pretty heavily. Or else,' he added hopefully, 'she must have been very drunk. Did she really say she was ready to swear to my presence at the marriage ceremony—wherever it may have taken place?'

'There's no doubt about it,' I replied. 'She told me so herself.'

'And you'd be equally ready to swear that I rolled past you this evening in a taxi, wouldn't you, Uncle Colin?'

he went on, with a marvellous glint of humour in his eyes. 'There must be something wrong somewhere; I'm blessed if I know who or where or what I'm supposed to be.'

Here Pittendrieck's harsh voice broke in. He had drawn his pocket-case out again, had taken an envelope from it, and was now engaged in extracting a stained and filthy sheet of paper from its equally filthy covering. 'I'm a bit tired of this foolery,' he growled, 'and I can tell you I've not come here for fun. Perhaps you'll be good enough to cast your eye on that, Mr. Blair'—he indicated the piece of paper—'and let me have your candid opinion of its contents.' And he came over to my chair, and thrust the document into my hand.

It was a single sheet of notepaper, stamped at the right-hand top corner with Julian's address, and showing signs of having been dried after immersion in the water. On this bit of paper, the words faint and blurred where the ink had run, but still legible, I read with growing horror and disgust a letter from Julian to Nigel. A letter which may not be printed here; a letter as filthy as the paper on which it was written; a letter which, as I hastened to assure myself, could only have been the production of a hopelessly disordered mind. It was dated at two o'clock on the Sunday morning, and was a damning indictment of Nigel's conduct from first to last. In particular, it laid stress on the fact that the money handed over to Mrs. Stingerson for the past five years had been paid not on the writer's behalf but on behalf of his false and cowardly friend. After perusing it carefully three times, I glanced at Nigel, fearful almost lest I should find some sign or trace on his face indicative of a nature at once morbidly deceitful and utterly foul. But, as he stood by the fire regarding me fearlessly and still with that glint of humour in his eyes, I knew my search had happily been as futile as my fears.

I then turned to Pittendrieck. 'Where did you get this?' I asked, holding out the poisonous document.

'I found it in a letter-case in Scrimgeour's pocket immediately after we recovered his body,' he replied. 'I should, of course, have handed it over to the authorities, but, mindful of my promise to you, I decided to let Mr. Balbirny see it first.'

'Here it is, Nigel,' I said, somewhat unwillingly. 'It is as well that you should read it.'

But before I could hand it over, the detective intervened. 'I had rather you read it aloud, Mr. Blair,' he objected, in a tone of voice of which there was no doubting the significance.

'Nay,' I retorted, 'you may do it yourself.' And I gave him the beastly thing.

He read it slowly and distinctly through, laying emphasis on every scurrilous word, while I never took my eyes off Nigel's face. And on it I saw never a sign of fear or even of dismay, but, rather, an expression of astonishment and regret.

When Pittendrieck had finished he replaced the letter in his pocket, and then, with blazing eyes, he turned on the young man. 'What have you to say to that?' he almost passionately demanded.

Nigel met the onslaught quite coolly. 'Nothing,' he answered slowly, 'except what I've said before—namely, that Scrimgeour must have been insane when he wrote it.'

'Humph!' retorted Pittendrieck. 'For your sake it's to be hoped that the jury will be of the same opinion.'

'Agreed!' said Nigel, without any hesitation. Then his voice hardened. 'Have you any further incriminating evidence to produce?' he asked.

Pittendrieck smiled in a contemptuous sort of way. 'Just one other little bit,' he replied, and put his fingers in his waistcoat pocket. 'Perhaps you'll be able to explain how this came to be in your possession?' he added, holding up a half-hoop of rubies and diamonds that glittered wickedly in the soft radiance of the shaded electric lights. And his voice was as harsh as the croak of a carrion crow.

Nigel glanced casually at the trinket. 'Ah,' he said, 'Mrs. Scrimgeour's other ring. It was smart of you to find that, and I reckon the discovery has just about torn it.'

Pittendrieck laughed almost good-humouredly. 'You're right,' he said, 'and gazed at the ring with a sort of admiration in his look.'

My heart sank within me, for the chain of evidence was being remorselessly welded link by link and I could see no loophole of escape for Nigel. I stared at Pittendrieck, expectantly awaiting his next few ominous words.

But it was Nigel who spoke, and there was a strange ring in his voice. 'Yes,' he said, 'the game is up. But,'—after a pause, which almost set my fingers tingling—'but, Mr. Pittendriech, up not for me, but for you!'

What happened during the next minute I cannot hope adequately to describe. I saw the detective's eyes contract with fear, and as ugly and evil a look as any I have ever seen alter the whole expression of his face. I saw the ring drop on the floor, and his hand dart rapidly round to the pocket at his hip, but, before he had time to draw his weapon, Nigel's fist had crashed home full on his face and he had fallen in a woeful heap among the fire-irons on the hearth. The revolver slipped from his grip as he went down, and I noticed a gun-metal matchbox from somewhere on his person shoot on to the carpet. Then, regardless of my crippled foot, I leapt out of my chair.

'Nigel,' I cried. 'What the devil are you doing?'

'It's all right, Uncle Colin,' he answered, stooping over the fallen man and taking possession of the revolver. 'I'm merely paying the first small instalment of rather a big debt.' Then, keeping a wary eye on Pittendriech, he picked up the matchbox and handed it to me. 'You may like to have a look at that,' he added, 'but be careful when you open it.'

In an automatic sort of way I followed his instructions, for I had not yet grasped the full significance of the situation. I opened the box—it was as heavy as iron, and found two compartments inside it. In one were a few matches, in the other a thin glass phial which I shook carefully out on to the palm of my hand. It was full of a transparent, colourless liquid. I examined it with some interest, and then looked inquiringly at Nigel.

'Prussic acid,' he explained cheerfully—'all nicely ready and waiting to be taken, if necessary, by our friend, Mr. Christie Pittendriech, who seems to make a habit of scattering these peculiar little boxes all over the place. Shockingly careless habit, I call it. Tripped over one of them myself last Saturday night in Cromdale Place when following Julian home. Allow me, Uncle Colin, to introduce you to Julian's murderer.'

As nearly as possible I dropped the phial of poison—

which would have been disastrous for us all—at the shock of this revelation. But, fortunately, I hung on to it, and so averted the calamity. I replaced it in the box, put the latter in my pocket, and then limped painfully and slowly to where Nigel was standing and held out my hand.

'My dear boy,' I said, 'please accept my congratulations—and my apologies,' I added rather wistfully, 'for having doubted you for a single moment.'

He caught and wrung my hand. 'No, no, Uncle Colin,' he cried. 'I won't hear of any apologies from you. I wanted you to doubt me just as much as you could.' Then, seeing my mystification, he grinned broadly in his old-accustomed way. 'I haven't time to explain everything now,' he went on laughing, 'but you have really played as useful a part as anyone else in the game of snookering this scum.' And he pointed to the detective, who still lay where he had fallen, silent indeed, but watching every movement of his captor with restless, eager and most intelligent eyes.

I looked at him with my instinct of repulsion heightened to an extraordinary degree, and saw him for what he was—a loathsome, scaly, scraggy-necked bird of prey. But no coward—to give him his due—for he faced my scorn as unflinchingly as he had faced the perilous position in which he must have known he stood every day of the week that had gone.

Then, turning away from him almost with a sense of relief, I looked at Nigel. 'Well,' I said, 'there's nothing more to do but ring up the police.'

'Yes,' he replied, somewhat disconsolately. 'I'm afraid that's so. Perhaps it's just as well,' he went on more cheerfully; 'one would only pollute one's fingers by touching such a swine.' And he went across to the telephone but came to an abrupt halt as Pittendrieck spoke.

'Think a moment before you ring up,' he said. 'You don't suppose I was such an abject fool as to come here unprepared for any awkward eventuality.' He glanced at the clock. 'It's now five minutes to twelve,' he continued, 'and if you're wise, you'll listen without interruption to my terms. When you've heard them, you can take your choice. You can ring up the police if you like, in which

case I can promise you that you'll, neither of you, ever see Miss Blair again. Or you can allow me to communicate by telephone with my man for the purpose of instructing him to bring Miss Blair along here at once—on the distinct understanding that, after she has returned, you pledge me your words of honour to give me ten minutes' grace before you acquaint the authorities with my evasion. I may add that, if my man does not hear from me by midnight, he will know how to dispose of Miss Blair.' He turned to Nigel, and 'You,' he said, 'may be thankful you did not hit hard enough to knock me senseless. You have now less than three minutes in which to decide.'

Here was the deuce of a dilemma in which to find ourselves, but there could only be one choice. Nigel's decision was perhaps made a little sooner than mine—at least he spoke first.

'You devil!' he roared. 'So far as I'm concerned, one hair of Miss Blair's head is worth ten thousand such rotten carcasses as yours. Get up and telephone; I give you my word you shall have all the grace you require to go to hell in your own damned way.'

'And you, Mr. Blair?' Pittendriech asked, taking no notice of Nigel's outburst.

'I give you my word, too.'

'Good,' he remarked, going to the instrument and, after a little trouble, getting through to his man. 'That you, G?' he said. 'Well, call up Mac at once and tell him to bring the girl round—he'll understand. And meet me with the car at X in ten minutes' time.' Then, having hung up the receiver just as the grandfather clock struck twelve, he sat himself down on the nearest chair.

'Close thing, that,' he said affably, wiping the sweat off his brow with a gaily-coloured handkerchief. 'May I help myself to a drink?'

As neither Nigel nor I felt inclined to respond, he poured out a stiff whisky and tossed it off. Then, after lighting a cigarette, he pushed his legs straight out in front of him and leaned back in the chair.

'Well,' he mused aloud, 'nobody can say I haven't had a dashed good run for my money these twenty years, or that I haven't been game to the end. It amuses me to see

you two good and moral men withdrawing the hem of your garments from me just because you happen to know I've committed a murder, or—to speak more accurately—two. Bah! my only mistake has been that I did not commit two more. Neither you, Mr. Balbirny, nor Mr. Grice would have been an irreparable loss to Edinburgh society, and I can assure you your lives have been hanging on a thread these last three days. Grice I ought to have done in a year ago when he first became suspicious that I had killed old Laird. If only I'd had the sense to do it, I shouldn't have been in such a hole now. Scrimgeour, of course, was doomed from the moment I discovered that he had spotted the same thing. A curious fellow, Scrimgeour—brilliantly intelligent, but singularly lacking in strength of character. I met him first of all a year ago when he came to consult me over the question of paying blackmail to Sally Stingerson for a child that was neither his—nor hers. Thanks to that besotted fool of a mother of his, he was being fleeced out of five hundred a year because of one little slip he'd once made. Well, any way, that knowledge gave me a hold on him which enabled me to lay my plans for his destruction. On the Sunday before the match he was kind enough—and foolish enough—to come to me and tell me that he'd allow me a week in which to clear out of the country. If I wasn't out by then, he said he'd report me to the police. I told him that, if he did, I'd tell all I knew about the Stingerson affair. It wasn't much of a threat, but it shook him a lot and he swore that he'd make no further move in the matter till we'd had another discussion together after the match was over. But I've no trust in a man with a puling conscience like his, so I got to work with a couple of friends—two scoundrels after my own heart—with the idea of doping him to such an extent that, to begin with, he'd disgrace himself utterly when he came to play. That came off all right, and the rest was easy, though you will understand that I had hoped to make his death look like a case of suicide.'

He spoke with a sort of perverted pride which was at once hideous and fascinating to hear, and Nigel and I were listening with all our ears. We said nothing, however, and I don't think he expected it. Presently he went on again.

'I knew all about you, Mr. Balbirny,' he said, 'and the jealousy of you that rankled in Scrimgeour's heart. So I went all out to fix the blame for the crime on you. We had a bit of luck in the matter of a confederate who was not unlike you in appearance, and also in the matter of your car and the policeman's togs. But you gave us a bad time of it that Sunday morning when you were waiting outside the house, if that's any consolation for you to know. The Lobban lassie's evidence gave me a bit of a fright, too, though I turned it to my advantage in the end. But the cream of the whole business, Mr. Blair, was when you called me in for the purpose of discovering—myself! I've thoroughly enjoyed our little talks together. You're the type of easy-going citizen who just asks to be taken in, and I hope you've not been disappointed. Let me give you a piece of advice, both of you, and then I'm done. You can apply it as you like. With the advance of scientific knowledge the methods of the police so far as the detection of crime is concerned are improving every day. But, then, so are the methods of the crooks who love crime for its own sake—and they're the only sort worth bothering about. And mark this, for it's well worth your attention—the crooks will usually have the dregs of democracy on their side. I mean the people who would like to do something of the sort themselves, were it not for the fear of punishment that is in their coward souls; the people who squeal for mercy to be shown to the most callous criminals—such as I am myself. And, by the Lord! if they only squeal loud enough, there's a certain type of politician who panders to the noise.' He gave a hoarse, cynical laugh. 'Twenty years ago,' he chortled, 'I tell you it was a toss-up whether I'd become a politician or a criminal myself!'

For a minute after he had finished silence reigned in the room. Then I braced myself to ask a question.

'Did you write the letter purporting to be from Scrimgeour to Miss Swayne?' I asked.

'Oh, yes, I was responsible for every letter connected with the case, but not for his conversation through the 'phone with her. That, I'm sure, was Grice's work. I owe him one for that.'

'The letter you've just read to us was your production too?'

'It was. I'm rather proud of it than otherwise. I flatter myself I had not studied Scrimgeour's psychological characteristics in vain.'

Nigel, on whose face was every indication of a profound contempt for the brute so nonchalantly taking his ease before us, shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Then the next moment he had leapt to his feet as the door opened and Daphne came into the room.

She was looking pale and tired, with her shingled hair in much disorder and the fur on her cloak showing evidence of a struggle. At the sight of which I ground my teeth with rage, and only restrained myself from taking that scraggy neck of Pittendriech's between my hands and squeezing the breath out of it by a tremendous effort of will. But Daphne's eyes were as clear and sparkling as ever as she stood surveying the scene before her with a pretty air of bewilderment, and I felt she had come to no real harm.

'What has happened?' she asked, with a little catch in her voice.

It was Nigel who answered, as, though her question had been put generally, her eyes had only been for him. 'Are you hurt, Daphne?' he inquired breathlessly. 'Because, if you are—the very least little bit—nothing can save that beast's skin.' And he pointed to the detective still lolling in his chair.

Daphne's eyes brightened. 'No, my lad,' she replied, with a touch of that delightful gaiety of spirit that was so markedly hers, 'I'm as sound as ever I was in body, mind and soul. Though'—she gave a comical little shudder—'I nearly made a bad error. I very nearly kissed the wrong young man. There was some excuse for me, for there wasn't much light inside the taxi, and the fellow who offered to kiss me was marvellously like you. On the outside only,' she hastened to explain, 'since it was the haste with which he proffered the salute that led to his undoing. For, you see, I knew you wouldn't have done that without first asking my permission.' She paused a moment, and seemed to be thinking deeply. Then she

laughed merrily. 'And there was another excuse for me, too,' she said, with all the mischief of the world in her voice, 'for the Lord only knows how much I wanted you to kiss me !'

She had forgotten the presence of Pittendriech in the room—for all the notice she took of him he might have been a bit of mud beneath her feet. She had forgotten me, though not, as she afterwards explained, my unqualified approval of the man of her choice. She had forgotten everything save the one glorious fact that she loved and was greatly loved in return.

I saw Nigel's eyes shining with a great joy as she held out her arms to him. He took her hands in his, and very gently kissed her on the lips.

Then, suddenly, with a wonderful colour in her cheeks, she stepped back from him. 'The rest is to come, my dear,' she said, 'but, just now, I want to know what actually has happened ?'

Nigel's eyes grew stern. 'This man,' he growled, nodding towards Pittendriech, 'has used you as a hostage for his own safety, and so for the moment escapes the penalty of death he most richly deserves. Yes,' he went on, answering her unspoken question, 'it was he who murdered Julian.'

'And would have laid the guilt on you,' she said, rounding off, as it were, the magnitude of the crime. She never so much as glanced at the detective, who still sat silently in his chair contemplating the proceedings with a vile sneer on his lips. 'The air would be sweeter in the room,' she added at last, 'if he were allowed to go.'

Nigel motioned to Pittendriech to do as he was bid, and held the door open. As they both went through I got to my feet and the next moment Daphne was in my arms, weeping a few tears of happiness and relief and trying to stammer an assurance of her vast joy. Then, drawn by some incomprehensible urge of morbid curiosity, we went arm in arm into the hall to see the last of the bowless devil who was just about to leave the house. He had put on his overcoat and hat, and was actually passing under the lintel of the front door when we came in sight of him. We were just in time to see his passage expedited by a mighty 'punt' behind, which, delivered as it was by

Nigel with exceeding zest and vigour, precipitated the scoundrel half-way down the steps leading to the street. He had barely time to recover himself sufficiently to hurl a selection of the choicest expletives at his assailant, who was holding on to the door and roaring with mirth, when another man slipped quietly up the steps and grabbed him by the collar of his coat. Pittendriech swung round at once and grappled with this new opponent. There was a short scuffle, the flash of a knife, a sharp cry of pain, and then the detective, jumping lightly over the body of his victim, was away towards Cromdale Place as fast as his legs could carry him.

CHAPTER XIX

THE whole incident had occurred so rapidly that there was no time, even for Nigel, to frustrate that blow. But, as soon as it was struck, he lost not a second in giving chase. He was down the flight of steps in two great jumps, and, when I managed to reach the door—for I could only hobble along with the greatest difficulty—I was just in time to see him disappearing round the corner of the crescent. Then I stooped down to examine the condition of the wounded man, and was horrified to find that it was Haggerstoun Grice. There was an ashen pallor over his face and blood upon his lips, but he was still conscious and trying to speak. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but solved the problem by sitting down beside him and bringing my ear close to his mouth. 'Balbirny's bungled the business badly,' he whispered. 'He's let the man away too soon—the police would have been here in another ten minutes. Ring them up, and let—them—know.'

His voice faded gradually away and his eyes closed, and I began to fear he was very near his end. I was wondering what best to do, when Daphne came out bringing cushions and rugs with her and a solution of my more immediate difficulty.

'I've just been through to Dr. Brett,' she announced, 'and he says he'll be here in no time. We're on no account to move the man, especially if he's been stabbed in the lung, as I informed the doctor I thought he had been. Who is it, Dad?'

'Haggerstoun Grice,' I explained, 'and I think he *has* been stabbed in the lung. Any way, he's in a pretty bad way. Look here, Daphne'—she was deftly putting a cushion under Grice's head—'cut away back to the house, and tell the police what's happened. I'm told they'll be here shortly, but hurry them up. This attack on Grice absolves us from our promise to Pittendrieck, I reckon; we need stand on no punctilio.'

'I made no promise,' said my daughter cheerfully. 'If you'll look after the man, I'll fix up things with the police.'

She spread the rugs over him, and hurried in. She was a long time away—so it seemed to me as I sat anxiously watching the inert form beside me. The trouble was that I didn't know what to do in such a case, and so, as Brett remarked long afterwards, very wisely refrained from doing anything at all. Presently, however, I heard the footsteps of a man running towards me, and there was Nigel back again.

'I missed the brute by inches,' he said ruefully. 'He had a car waiting for him just round the corner, and was into it and away before I could get a hold of him.' He stooped and inspected Grice, and then looked anxiously up at me. 'I was afraid it was old Hagers,' he went on. 'Poor chap! he seems pretty bad.'

'Stabbed in the lung. I think, but we can do nothing till Brett arrives. By the way, Grice was able to speak a few words before he became unconscious, and he then murmured something about your having let Pittendrieck away too soon. What did he mean by that?'

'Well, you see, we'd arranged that the police should be here—at the front and the back of the house—at half past twelve. Grice's idea was that I should have my interview with the man as suggested and take plenty of time over it—for the purpose of making the beast give himself absolutely away. If the worst came to the worst and Pittendrieck showed any signs of bolting, I was to

knock him down and sit on his head while you up rang the police. He thought that little scheme couldn't possibly go wrong. I certainly knocked the beggar down according to plan, but, when Pittendrieck used Daphne as his trump card, the scheme went to bits. We were both bunkered there.'

'We were,' I agreed, with some bitterness, 'and the failure of the scheme is likely to cost Grice heavily enough into the bargain.'

'Looks like it, poor fellow! But I don't think Pittendrieck will get far away. The police have been holding up every car leaving town since midnight, and will continue doing so till further orders. Hallo! here's somebody coming now,' he exclaimed, as a motor came round the corner into the crescent—to pull up sharply right in front of us. To my great relief it was Hubert Brett.

There is no need to relate with any detail how, when the police arrived, Grice was carefully carried into the dining-room and gently deposited on a couch, on which he lay for many a long and weary day hovering between life and death.

Nor need I dwell on the utter failure of the authorities to discover any trace of Christie Pittendrieck himself—alive or dead. Of the amazing double life he had led for many years a certain amount of evidence was gradually brought to light. Not much, indeed, but at least enough to show what one of his main methods of obtaining a livelihood had been, apart altogether from the income he had made from what might be called his more legitimate occupation. The authorities got their first inkling of this method from their interrogation of Mrs. Stingeron.

She—when at last assured that he was not likely to show his face in Edinburgh again, so great was her fear of him—informed them that a week after he had discovered that she had been blackmailing Julian he had started to blackmail her. On a threat of reporting her doings to the police unless she agreed to his proposal, he had forced her to consenting to hand over to him thirty-three and a third per cent of the annual boodle—in other words, he was in the habit of blackmailing the blackmailer—a notoriously cowardly person, as a general rule—and probably found an easy victim every time. Three or four other cases of

the same sort were quietly investigated, and the same story invariably told. But, naturally, most of the sufferers maintained a complete silence, and the exact extent of Pittendrieck's similar depredations—if depredations they may be called—is never likely to be known. To me it seemed as if there was a certain amount of poetic justice in his activities in this line.

There were other doubtful lines of business besides this in which it was proved he had been interested, but enough has been said to indicate the manner of fiend he was. I should have mentioned, by the way, that not only did a thorough search of his house reveal nothing incriminating against him, but that a strict examination of the various men he employed conclusively showed that, with the possible exception of the man known as Mac, they were utterly ignorant of his real character. The man G. for instance, who drove the car in which his master got away after wounding Grice, swore that he was under the impression that Pittendrieck had had the most lucky escape from assassination at the hands of Nigel. He told us that Pittendrieck had stopped the car before it had gone four hundred yards and, after giving him orders to return home, had walked quickly back in the direction from which he had come.

But of Pittendrieck himself, as I have said, no trace has yet been found. It is certain that he did not get away from Edinburgh that night, and for all I know—I am writing a year after the events took place—he may still be there. Masquerading, maybe, in some marvellous disguise as a most respectable representative of that democracy he so heartily despised. It is an unpleasant thought, but I give it for what it is worth.

That Barnaby Fagan and Aloysius Sadde had been the two scoundrels after his own heart to whom Pittendrieck had alluded there was very little doubt. Especially the former, whose prompt departure from Edinburgh a few days before the final exposure of his principal's villainy had secured him immunity from capture by the police. He is still at liberty, but that it was he and not Sadde who had assisted the actual murderer to dispose of Julian's body was highly probable, though the fact has not been

—and in all likelihood never will be—definitely proved. But his disappearance, added to the information given by Sadde, when he and his miserable dupe were rounded up three days afterwards—they had, of course, never been within fifty miles of Penrith—and brought back for examination, went far towards substantiating the strong suspicion under which he was held.

As for Sadde, it was found impossible to charge him with any indictable offence. He swore that every single one of Pittendriech's accusations as expressed to me was the invention of a superb liar and, as such, devoid of any truth, and he successfully defied the authorities to disprove his statement. In the end he got off scot-free, and with an adoring and wealthy, if somewhat peevish and trying wife into the bargain. For the trifling outlay of five shillings and a penny they legalized the irregular marriage, and are now living a comfortable and lazy conjugal life in the south of France.

But, as so often happens in these cases, the only malefactor who met with his deserts was the one who deserved punishment least of all. This was the high-spirited but misguided youth who had impersonated Nigel. He was sentenced to a considerable term of imprisonment for having stolen Nigel's car, forged Nigel's name, and kidnapped Nigel's sweetheart.

It was four weeks before I was permitted to interview Haggerstoun Grice on the part he had played in the soul-shaking drama, which for a week had so completely disturbed the normal orderliness of our lives. I had more than once attempted to pump Nigel on the subject, but I might as well have tried to extract a wink out of the eyelid of a graven image. His invariable answer was to the effect that old Hagers would doubtless tell me all I wished to know in due course of time; for himself, he protested that, in view of the new and amazingly wonderful joy which had come into his life, he hadn't the foggiest interest in any hoary old incident of the past. Which assertion, if one might judge from his perfectly idiotic behaviour, was even an understatement of the truth. And Daphne was just as great an idiot herself. It was impossible to get either of them to be serious for a single moment, and I finally gave up the task in despair.

Grice, however, was distinctly more communicative, I found him looking worn and thin, but with an alert expression on his face that betokened no particular loss of vitality—in spite of his desperate wound. I shook hands with him, congratulated him on his recovery, and sat down by the side of his bed. After a discursive remark or two, we got down to the business in hand.

'You'll be wanting to hear my story, Blair,' he said, 'but, before I begin, I'd like you to tell me yours, including every insinuation that Christie Pittendriech levelled at my devoted head.'

I told him without reserve or hesitation, laying particular stress on the arson charge. It seemed to me that he winced a bit when he heard that, but he made no comment and continued to listen in silence until I had come to the end.

Then, without pause, he spoke. 'Yes,' he said, 'our friend, Pittendriech, has brains such as many a better man might envy. I do not pretend to know how he found out about my intense desire to get possession by hook or by crook of that document of mine which old Cantax had in his house. Unless, of course, Cantax and he were partners in iniquity. I admit I would willingly have burned the old fellow's place down to get it—I own up to that, though I'd rather not mention what the nature of the document was—it was burnt long ago, and that's an end of it. I admit, too, that my conduct on the night of the conflagration was such as might easily have aroused Pittendriech's suspicions. It was not my hand, however, that set fire to the place, and I'd like you to know that. All I did was to employ a professional burglar to rifle Cantax's safe for me, and that job had been well and truly carried out an hour before the place was set alight. I confess I had a bad time of it for a week or two afterwards, wondering whether my share in the proceedings might possibly have been discovered. But, as nothing happened, I gradually ceased to worry about the thing. Then, like a bolt from the blue, I suddenly received an anonymous letter informing me that, unless I was prepared to purchase the writer's silence, he would be compelled to lay the true facts of the case before the authorities. It wasn't my burglar friend who had written—I very soon found

that out—but it was obviously somebody who was pretty accurately acquainted with the facts. You may imagine the state I was in, but at least I managed to keep my head. As a matter of fact, I risked taking the letter to the police, hoping that the writer might be afflicted with a conscience more fearful than my own. I made a point of going openly to the authorities, so that the writer might be in no doubt as to the method by which I meant to meet his attack. You see, I thought I might be watched on my way, and I very soon discovered that I was being followed by Pittendriech himself. I thought at first that he was acting on behalf of the police, but when on their advice we set a trap for the blackmailer and nobody walked into it, my suspicions concerning that astute gentleman began to take shape. Faintly enough at first, but as time went on much more decidedly. I have always been interested in crime, and, once my suspicions about the fellow had been awakened, I set myself to investigate his career. I found that he had originally been a member of the regular force in London, but that on account of his rather brutal methods he had been given a hint to resign. Then I went into details of his life in Edinburgh, and bit by bit was forced to the conclusion that he was by no means the sound fellow he seemed to be. In particular, I could come to no other conclusion than that in the Laird case it was through his agency that the old man had met his death. From what you've just told me it would appear that I was right. But at the time I had—and could have had—no proof. So I made up my mind to bide a wee until he gave me another chance. And that chance came at last with Julian's Scrimgeour's death.'

He took a sip or two from a glass of lemonade that was standing on a table near his bed, and then resumed his tale.

'When I came round on the Monday morning and found that you had called Pittendriech in, I knew I was in luck's way. You must, of course, remember my former knowledge of the man, for that made me quick to note the weak spots in his case. I felt convinced from the first that Scrimgeour was already dead, and told you so at the time. I also told you that the clue to the mystery was held by Susan Swayne. At least I think I put it that Pittendriech

would be well advised to concentrate his attention on her. I was practically certain even then that Scrimgeour's letter to her had been fabricated by the detective himself as a "blind," and I'm afraid I deliberately used you for the purpose of showing him that I was taking a keen interest in the case. I trusted you would tell him all I said, and I did all sorts of things besides to make him feel I knew a great deal more about the matter than I really did. I knew the risk I was running, and indeed he nearly got me one night—in the same way as he did get me in the end. But I succeeded in making him badly rattled, and that was what I wanted. I knew from your silence about myself that the beggar was going all out to poison your mind against me, and so I encouraged the notion by every means in my power. By such methods as searching the house next door, though the Lord knows I'd nothing to search for. I knew he'd have left no trace of his depredations there. Also by enlisting young Balbirny on my side, because I felt sure that move would worry you as much as it would alarm Pittendriech. It was an exceedingly well-designed plot against that youth. Aided by a little more luck, it might easily have been hatched, and Balbirny would have been hard put to it to prove his innocence. Of course, those of us who knew the lad at all well would never have been convinced of his guilt, and I'm not sure that Pittendriech's choice of him as a victim was not the really fatal error he made. Though you will understand that he had to work with the most convenient tool at hand. I was in some doubt as to whether I should acquaint young Balbirny with my suspicions about Pittendriech, but in the end decided that such a course could do no harm. He wasn't exactly an ideal or a willing accomplice, and it was only when I assured him that I couldn't bring my *coup* off without his assistance that he consented to come in. He helped me enormously in three ways. First of all, he brought me on the Thursday the curiously-constructed matchbox on which he had slipped, and which—all unconsciously to himself—he had picked up and put in his pocket at the time. It was a replica of the one you saw later on, but, as soon as I got hold of it, I guessed whose it might be. If Pittendriech's, then it proved that

he had been in the neighbourhood of this Crescent, and probably, indeed, almost certainly, on the fatal night. Secondly, at my suggestion, Balbirny borrowed his mother's engagement ring, and left it lying in a drawer in his dressing-table at his digs. My hope was that Pittendriech would make a point of palming it off as one of the two rings he thought had been stolen. On my first visit to Scrimgeour's house, as I ought to have told you before, I had found out from the cook that only one ring was in reality missing. The other Mrs. Scrimgeour had discovered after Pittendriech had gone, but, being what she is, she had not taken the trouble to inform him of the fact. This duplicate ring, which was removed by Pittendriech on the Friday night, largely contributed to his undoing. Producing it at all was another fatal error; the action shows how rattled he must have been by that time. Thirdly, Balbirny, from Thursday night onwards, must have appeared to have bolted. For when he returned to his rooms that night, he left immediately by the back door, and came and stayed with me.'

Once again Grice took another sip of lemonade before concluding his yarn.

'Early on Thursday morning I telephoned to a nephew of mine who lives in Essex, and got him to ring up Miss Swayne from Liverpool Street Station in the character of Julian Scrimgeour. I felt fairly sure that she would immediately inform you of the amazing occurrence, and I arranged to be at your house myself when the information arrived. Then, armed with that information, I sallied out to meet Pittendriech. I wanted badly to see what effect the news, suddenly blurted out, would have on him. He's pretty quick in the uptake, but he wasn't quite quick enough this time. It took him at least five seconds to simulate any degree of surprise. Moreover, he soon abandoned the sorry attempt he had made, and I could see that, if there hadn't been two or three men in the vicinity, he'd have knifed or shot me then. There's no mistaking murder in a man's eyes. Any way, I had found out what I'd wished to know. His account of my firing at him later on was pure moonshine. I've no doubt he fired the shots himself, and I don't suppose for a moment that the wound on his finger was more than a scratch. I

heard the firing, because I did not leave the vicinity of the pond till two o'clock the next morning. For I had been thinking hard and it had occurred to me—why, I can't explain—that all this searching in the neighbourhood of the pond might conceivably have a very sinister meaning behind it. What more likely, in fact, than that, having removed any suspicion of Scrimgeour's body being anywhere near the place, the murderer should get rid of it in the very spot where nobody would ever think of looking for it? And sure enough, some time between twelve and one, I heard two men approaching the pond, who, from their slow pace and heavy breathing, were obviously carrying a heavy load between them. Then I heard a splash, and a short, harsh laugh from one of the men. I should have recognized the voice even if he hadn't said a few words immediately afterwards. "Now slip back the way you came, and meet me to-morrow not later than six." It was Pittendriech right enough, though who the second fellow was I haven't an idea. They went off at once, and there was I left cursing myself for having been such a damned fool as to have omitted the precaution of having somebody with me who could have corroborated my evidence. For I knew only too well how easily Pittendriech could have twisted my evidence against myself, and how glad he'd be to avail himself of the opportunity. So I determined to say nothing for the next forty-eight hours, and let the next move come from him. Why he decided to act as he did I don't know, but I imagine he may have thought it better to do something soon lest you should suggest it was high time to call in further aid. Once he had, so to speak, found the body, my course was clear. I communicated with the authorities and asked them to surround your house by half-past twelve, and informed them that I should have the greatest pleasure in then handing Scrimgeour's murderer over to them. You know why the plan broke down—there was the usual woman in the case! He grunted cynically. 'Though I daresay,' he went on ruefully, 'that my desire to round off the whole affair in a kind of theatrical blaze of fireworks may be just as much to blame.'

I laughed at this remark, it was so eminently charac-

teristic of the man. 'No,' I said, with conviction, 'surely the mistake you made was not having taken me into your confidence from the first. I shouldn't have spoiled your game.'

'I don't agree with you,' he retorted. 'It was essential from every point of view that you should remain in ignorance of what the rest of us were doing. At all costs it was necessary for you to show an implicit belief in our quarry. And you know, he'd soon have found it out if you'd had an inkling that he wasn't straight. He'd have read your thoughts as if they'd been printed on the pages of a book.'

'Well, if he had, it wouldn't have mattered. We might have nabbed the brute, if I had only known.'

The great Haggerstoun Grice turned a disapproving eye on me. 'You haven't got the case in its true perspective,' he declared. 'You're still a bit inclined to resent the rôle for which you were so admirably cast.'

'Confound you!' I returned, getting up from my seat and regarding him with much disfavour. 'I couldn't have made such a botch of the thing as you have done. If I'd known, I believe the scoundrel would have been well on his way to the gallows by now instead of gloating over his escape.'

Grice settled himself comfortably among his pillows. 'No, Blair,' he said earnestly, 'believe me, you're wrong. Pittendriech would never have come to the gallows; remember the matchbox and the phial therein. But his claws have been clipped, and he's incapable of doing further harm. I think we could not have hoped for a higher degree of success than that. I quite understand your feelings; you think you've been made a fool of, and are naturally wroth at the thought. But I'm convinced that without your assistance we would never have gained so much.'

'Confound you!' I exclaimed once more, as I turned and left the room. He might be right in what he had said, but I was not prepared to admit it. Of course, as regarded the latter part of his remarks, there was a sting of truth in them. Even now I grow warm all over when I think of the way I was taken in. Especially on that occasion when I interviewed Sadde and Pittendriech together, and they staged that little scene on the doorstep for my benefit before driving off in the detective's car. I get positively

hot when I try to imagine what ribald mirth their subsequent conversation must have evoked.

But my story is finished, and I leave the problem to the judgment of the reader. When the question was first mooted as to whether it should be given to the world I suggested to Grice, as I had done to Brett, that he should undertake the task. I assured him, with a twinkle of amusement in my eye, that I thought he was far better qualified for the job than anyone else, with the possible exception of Christie Pittendriech himself. Rather to my surprise he gravely declined the sporting invitation.

'No, thank you, my friend,' he said. 'I could never get so far outside myself as to tell the tale in as honest and unbiassed way as it deserves to be told. I should, for one thing, always be trying to whitewash my own character, and that would be a mistake from every point of view. But you will paint me as you thought I was, and you may paint me as black a villain as you like. For, sometimes, say after a bad bilious attack, I regard myself in the glass, and am inclined to repeat that famous saying attributed—erroneously or not, I don't know—to Dr. Samuel Johnson. "But for the grace of God," I say to myself, "you might have been even such another as Christie Pittendriech!"'

I repeated this answer to Daphne and Nigel last night. After being married in July, they had had a long and delightful honeymoon, in the course of which they had visited my two sons overseas. Curiously enough, they had returned home just in time to hear the result of the International match which had been played between England and Scotland that very afternoon. To our unholy joy, Scotland, as all the world knows, lowered the pride of England on the sacred Twickenham ground by no less than 28 points to 3. As was natural, and, perhaps, inevitable, our memories had reverted to the match at Murrayfield a year before, and the talk had been largely concerned with Julian Scrimgeour.

Said Daphne, regarding her husband with an amusing expression of tolerant affection in her eyes, 'Nigel is of the opinion that the character of Mr. Haggerstoun Grice is in need of as much whitewashing as it can possibly get.'

'Daphne,' retorted that young man, imitating her manner of speech with ready wit and a joyous facility, 'has not as yet reached the age of discretion, and I doubt if ever she will. What I am really concerned about is not the whitewashing of old Haggars—he can go hang!—but—what's the word?—the rehabilitation of Julian's fair fame. They say that Alec Cowieson did well enough to-day behind a pack of winning forwards, but just think what Julian might have done. And I wonder,' he added, rather wistfully, 'how many people gave him a thought during the progress of the game?'

I felt a little uncomfortable; I believed I had done my best while writing the story to be as fair as I could all round, but I very much doubted whether my account of Julian would meet with this sturdy supporter's approval. 'I am in your hands, Nigel,' I said at last, 'and I shall be glad to have your considered opinion of the man.'

'And it's this, Uncle Colin,' he began with a rush. 'I shall always stand for him as I knew him up to the last week of his life. When you think of that infernal mother of his—I hope she's a sadder and a wiser woman now!—(the pun was unintentional, but Daphne and I both caught the allusion, and exchanged smiles) 'and remember the various difficulties she made for him at every turn, I consider he made good in a very remarkable way. For you must admit that again and again he triumphed over what Dr. Brett—good man, Dr. Brett—described to me as a whole crowd of complexes and inhibitions—whatever they may mean—and unconscious fears from which he had suffered all his life. Look at his record in athletics of every sort and kind! Look at the rattling good literary work he was beginning to turn out! Look at the pluck he must have shown, if his fears were anything like those which Dr. Brett tried to demonstrate to me, in merely facing up to a filthy beast like Pittendrieck and giving him a week to clear out of the country! I'm not particularly conscious of fears and the other rotten things, but ask Daphne what she thinks of my prowess at games and my literary powers. She's biassed, of course, and won't give an honest answer, but all the same she knows—and I know—that there can be no comparison between us.'

And I tell you I'd have thought twice before tackling Pittendriech.'

'You didn't—the last time you saw him,' Daphne calmly interrupted, making a just protest against this preposterous perversion of the truth.

Nigel pulled up for a second, and regarded his wife with dismay. 'Oh, that?' he hesitated, stammering a bit. 'That was quite a different matter,' he went on, getting rapidly into his stride again. 'That was done when I was seeing red, while Julian's attack was made in cold blood. No, from my boyhood up Julian was always a bit of a hero to me, and, as I'm sure I never got anything but good out of my admiration for him and his friendship for me, I see no reason whatsoever for changing my opinion.'

He came to a sudden stop, and looked at me out of his clear, steady eyes as if daring me to disagree with the verdict he had given.

'Thank you, Nigel,' I said simply. 'Be that his epitaph.'

Then Daphne chimed in. 'You're a loyal friend, my lad,' she observed, with a little tremor in her voice.

He glanced at her, quick to note the feeling she had shown. 'Dear old thing,' he replied, and there was a rare note of tenderness in the words he spoke, 'don't talk rot. Would you have married me if I'd been anything else?'

She got up, and went and stood close by the door. 'No jolly fear,' she said. 'That's why——' she looked at me specially, and I almost started at the pride and exaltation of womanhood which shone from her eyes, 'that's why I've decided to lose no time in carrying on the breed!' And she kissed her hand to both of us, and bolted from the room.

I looked at Nigel inquiringly—he appeared to be slightly more flushed than was his usual wont.

He gave me a little shame-faced nod in response, and then a broad grin spread over his face. 'She'll end by driving me to drink, bless her!' he cried. 'What about a spot of something strong and fizzy?'

DATE OF ISSUE

This book must be returned
within 3, 7, 14 days of its issue. A
fine of ONE AN'A per day will
be charged if the book is overdue.



